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Rethinking the Concept of Obscenity: The Erotic Subject and Self-Annihilation in the Works of Blake, Shelley, and Keats

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Declaration

I declare that this doctoral thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where states otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

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Abstract

This doctoral thesis aims to examine how certain sexual images and motifs commonly deemed “obscene” are represented as a unique aesthetic phenomenon in the works of English Romantic poets, William Blake, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats. It can be observed that sexual desire becomes an emblem that the Romantics use to rebel against political and religious oppression and to establish individual subjectivity free from the restraint of scientific rationalism, further accessing a transcendental state of the “Poetic Genius.” Departing from the long-established readings of sexual desire in the Romantic poetry, this thesis first situates the idea of obscenity in the historical contexts of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to reconceptualise it as an alternative form of aesthetics of self-annihilation correlated with the sublime. In the main chapters, by exploring the oft-ignored dark and violent aspects of eroticism in Blake’s *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and *Milton*, Shelley’s *The Cenci* and *Laon and Cythna*, and Keats’s “Isabella” and “The Eve of St. Agnes,” I argue that “obscenity” emerge in English Romanticism as a unique aesthetic phenomenon of self-annihilation, particularly empowered in the experiences of sex, religious ecstasy, and poetic creation itself. The research results of this thesis delineate that in the works of these poets, religion, art, and eroticism form an essential trinity in the human psyche that constantly seeks to build, reshape, escape from, and eventually destroy existing identities. It also epitomises the desire to go beyond the *status quo* and the ordinary experience of limited selfhood. An examination of this heterogeneous trinity provides an alternative angle to approach other canonised literary works of English Romanticism and explore within them the elements that are “less canonised” and “obscene.” Furthermore, it resonates with the recent studies that have highlighted the material and somatic aspects in the Romantic poets and their works.

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Abbreviations

<i>BPD</i>	<i>Blake's Poetry and Designs</i> . Edited by Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant. W. W. Norton, 2008.
<i>CPPB</i>	<i>The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake</i> . Edited by David Erdman. Anchor Books, 1998.
<i>CPWS</i>	<i>The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley</i> . Edited by Neville Rogers. Clarendon, 1972, 2 vols.
<i>Enquiry</i>	<i>A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful</i> . Edited by James T. Boulton. Blackwell, 1990.
<i>KPP</i>	<i>Keats's Poetry and Prose</i> . Edited by Jeffrey N. Cox. W. W. Norton, 2009.
<i>LK</i>	<i>The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821</i> . Edited by Hyder Edward Rollins. Harvard UP, 1958, 2 vols.
<i>LS</i>	<i>The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley</i> . Edited by Frederick L. Jones. Oxford UP, 1964, 2 vols.
<i>MW</i>	<i>Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works</i> . Edited by Zachery Leader and Michael O'Neill. Oxford UP, 2009.
<i>PJK</i>	<i>The Poems of John Keats</i> . Edited by Jack Stillinger. Heinemann, 1978.
<i>PWS</i>	<i>The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley</i> . Edited by Mary Shelley. Edward Moxon, 1874.

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INTRODUCTION

ROMANTIC IDEOLOGIES OF SEXUAL DESIRE

In his 1982 essay "Dangerous Blake," W. J. T. Mitchell names "obscenity" as one of three problems in Blake's works that awaits critical attention. He argues that "Blake was not a nice man: he was filthy with work and visionary conviction" (414).¹ By using the words "obscenity" and "filthy," Mitchell seems to imply that what Blake presents sexually in his poetry is unpleasant, offensive, and tasteless, signifying certain representations that will degrade the aesthetic value of Blake's works. Mitchell, however, does not offer any further explanation or textual analysis. The example of Blake's "obscenity" Mitchell refers to is only the last two lines of "I saw a chapel all of gold," a short poem collected in Blake's Notebook:

I saw a chapel all of gold
That none did dare to enter in
And many weeping stood without
Weeping mourning worshipping

I saw a serpent rise between
The white pillars of the door
And he forcd & forcd & forcd
Down the golden hinges tore

And along the pavement sweet
Set with pearls & rubies bright
All his slimy length he drew,
Till upon the altar white

Vomiting his poison out
On the bread & on the wine
So I turnd into a sty
And laid me down among the swine
(CPPB 467-468)

The sexual images are far from explicit in this poem, compared to passages such as "I'll lie beside thee on a bank & view their wanton play / in lovely copulation" in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (7.25-26, CPPB 50) or the obvious sexual intercourse in *America: a Prophecy*, "when Orc assay'd his

¹ The other two problems are madness and incoherence.

fierce embrace” upon his sister the “Shadowy Female” (1.10, *CPPB* 51), or again the outright championing of sexual desire that men and women mutually seek “The lineaments of Gratified Desire” (*CPPB* 474). One must read the serpent as the Christian archetype of Satan who lures Eve into the Fall indicative of sexual knowledge, or undergo a process of graphic imagination to picture the serpent as an ejaculating phallic image and the white altar as a receptive vulvar one. It requires certain metaphorical and metaphysical considerations to deem the poem sexual, yet it is a direct example of Mitchell’s argument about Blake’s obscenity. Obscenity, therefore, stands out from mere graphic depictions of sexual intercourse. In “I saw a chapel all of gold,” certain qualities drive Mitchell’s labelling of the poem as obscene: violence (“And he forcd & forcd & forcd”), sacrilege, excrement (“Vomiting his poison out / On the bread & on the wine”), and dehumanisation (“So I turnd into a sty / And laid me down among the swine”). The influx of sexual desire, embedded allusively in these images of obscenity, runs counter to the notion that in English Romanticism, sexual interaction is presented as a form of liberation from religious and political oppression and an access to individual subjectivity. Obscenity, as unconventional manifestations of sexual desire, can be observed and explored in a wider range of Romantic works, in addition to “I saw a chapel all of gold.”

Therefore, this doctoral thesis aims to examine how certain sexual images and motifs commonly deemed “obscene” are represented as a unique aesthetic phenomenon in the works of the English Romantic poets, William Blake, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats. It can be observed that sexual desire becomes an emblem that the Romantics use to rebel against political and religious oppression and to establish individual subjectivity free from the restraint of scientific rationalism, further accessing a transcendental state of the “Poetic Genius.”² In Blake’s poetry, sexual desire is termed “free love” and “fiery joy,” in order to counter the Christian tradition

² As Anne K. Mellor points out, however, the metaphorical function of sexual desire in Romantic poetry is by large male-centred. Female characters and voices are often silenced, absorbed, and assimilated into the poetic enterprise (no matter with aesthetic, religious, or political ends) of male poets, especially the Big Six. See Mellor’s *Romanticism and Gender*, pp. 17-29.

of asceticism. In his *America: a Prophecy*, Orc, a mythical character embodying sexual desire and the America Revolution in Blake's system, rises against Urizen, the avatar of Jehovah and the conservative European powers. For Blake, sex is also the divine source of "Poetic Genius" that emancipates humanity from rigid rationalist and scientific abstraction. For Byron and Shelley, sexual love, especially incestuous attachment between siblings, signifies the perfect and purest affection that opposes paternal oppression, as we can observe in the former's *The Bride of Abydos* and the latter's *Laon and Cythna* (later revised as *The Revolt of Islam*). In Keats's "Lamia," the erotic love between serpent and man is thwarted by the old sage, Apollonius. Such a conflict can be read as the Romantic antithesis between sexual passion and cold rationalist regulation. Also, sexual love conflicts with capitalist calculation and paternal cruelty in "Isabella." Departing from the long-established readings of sexual desire in the Romantic poetry as "the energy for critical activity, for the autonomy of individuality" (Robinson 8), this thesis does not focus on its positive symbolism of self-sufficiency and political/religious/social liberties, but seeks to excavate the oft-ignored dark and violent aspects of eroticism in the works of Blake, Shelley, and Keats.

Before examining the sexual aspects of English Romanticism and their critical interpretations in existing studies, it is necessary to survey the overall trend of scholarship in Romantic studies, which, as Jerome J. McGann observes, is often "dominated by a Romantic Ideology" and "an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representation" (*The Romantic Ideology* 1). McGann perceives an ontological division in the readings of English Romantic poetry, a division between two critical trends led by René Wellek and Arthur Lovejoy. The former promotes an intrinsic unity in the apparent diversity of Romantic works, while the latter emphasises the "discrimination of Romanticisms" (*The Romantic Ideology* 17). M. H. Abrams highlights the literary heritage of the Bible and Milton in Romantic poetry, and points out that these Romantic poets represent a unitary, although revised, framework of biblical design, in order to pursue "alternative ways to the

Millennium" (56). Abrams's understanding of English Romanticism demonstrates a progressive cosmological order based on Judeo-Christian tradition, from a primary innocence, a fall, a catastrophic but also purifying apocalypse, to a final reestablishment of an earthly paradise. Abrams's framework of secularised Christianity, however, as McGann observes, cannot accommodate Shelley's scepticism, Byron's pessimism and misanthropy, or Keats's indulgence in excessive and sometimes morbid melancholy. Thus, there exists a crucial deficiency in Romantic studies that follow Abrams's formulation. Mario Praz's 1933 *The Romantic Agony* and Anne K. Mellor's 1980 *English Romantic Irony* are the two studies that supplement such a deficiency in Abrams's scheme. Praz explores the darker sides of English Romanticism. He proposes that "[t]he essence of Romanticism consequently comes to consist in that which cannot be described" (14), adding that "the Romantic beauty was enhanced by exactly those qualities which seem to deny it, by those objects which produce horror; the sadder, the more painful it was, the more intensely they relished it" (27).

While Praz highlights the negative aspects of Romantic sensitivity, Mellor proposes that such negativity reflects on the Romantic poets and their own works. Evoking Friedrich Schlegel's theories of poetry and its relation to the world, Mellor argues that "irony" is a pervasive phenomenon in English Romanticism.³ This phenomenon is based on the poets' understanding of the world as an ever-changing chaos, in which any orders—political, religious, and moral—fail to operate, and their self-understanding of the limits of their poetic work in representing such a cosmological order (or non-order). Romantic poetry, therefore, is a crystallisation of scepticism and what Nietzsche would term "pessimism of strength." As Mellor observes, "even as he [the Romantic poet] denies the absolute validity of his own perceptions and structuring conceptions of the universe, even as he consciously

³ The works of Schlegel in Mellor's discussion include "On Incomprehensibility," *Dialogue on Poetry*, and "On the Limits of the Beautiful." The most crucial ideas Mellor evokes, in order to support her argument of "Romantic irony," is Schlegel's perception of the world as "constructed by the understanding out of incomprehensibility or chaos" and how such an amoral chaos becomes the most fertile source for poetry, the exuberance of *Fülle*, the "abundance" of life and energy (*Romantic Irony* 7).

deconstructs his mystifications of the self and the world, he must affirm and celebrate the process of life by creating new images and ideas" (*Romantic Irony* 5). In the Romantic poets' artistic efforts, despite the keen awareness of their own limitations, Mellor further discovers a tendency towards self-destruction: "many central romantic works exhibit a structure that is deliberately open-ended and inconclusive" and "present a simultaneously creative and de-creative form" (6). Poetic creation, therefore, consists of the conflicting drives to create and to destroy, to establish and to annihilate self and subjectivity. In short, Praz's and Mellor's approaches supplement the unified readings of Romantic poetry led by Wellek and Abrams. Apart from acknowledging a linear progressive process toward a lost innocence and divinity, Praz and Mellor recognise certain points of disruption and derailment in this "Romantic progression." The representation of sexual desire in Romantic poetry is also incorporated by scholars into their interpretations, as the form of a "Romantic ideology" to support their specific readings, in Wellek's unified model, Abrams's alternative Christian cycle, Praz's negative perception, and Mellor's "Romantic irony." My thesis on the erotic subject and self-annihilation in Romantic poetry departs from these ideologies in the existing scholarship on English Romanticism. Through the re-conceptualisation of the idea of "obscenity," I explore how sexual desire is represented in the works of Blake, Shelley, and Keats, and demonstrate the aesthetic phenomenon of eroticism that decentralises self and dissolves subjectivity in Romantic poetry.

The Romantic tendency to employ sexual desire as a form of positive affect reflects the drastic shift of cosmic thinking at the end of eighteenth century. Such a shift of metaphysical consideration of the world, according to Lovejoy, centres on the detachment from "an absolutely rigid and static scheme of things," an immovable God-based moral ideology, and the affinity to what Morse Peckham terms an ever-changing and ever-growing "dynamic organism," "philosophy of becoming," and a "universe of emergents" (Enscoe 1-9). Sexual passion and the body from which it flows had been discredited for its corporeality and mortality, which contrasts with the spirituality of

Christianity in pre-Romantic literature. Such a phenomenon can be noticed in, for example, *The Faerie Queene*, in which people who are allured by the enchantress Acrasia into the “Bower of Bliss” are transformed into beasts. Edmund Spenser’s literary design here indicates that the overflowing of sexual desire degrades humanity to the level of bestiality, a state even more remote from the realm of God. That emphasis on the virtue of chastity in *The Faerie Queene* also celebrates Queen Elizabeth’s enterprise as a virgin ruler, insinuating the synthesis of divinity and politics and the superiority of spiritual love over corporeal desire. For pre-Romantic writers, indulgence in sexual love not only prevents human beings from entering Heaven and denies them final salvation, but also hinders them from achieving secular enterprise. Furthermore, the influx of sexual desire, as a form of unbridled “passion,” poses a threat to the belief in self-sufficiency centring around reason, the ideal means to construct an epistemological order for eighteenth-century intellectuals, as Alexander Pope asserts in one of his epistles: “when his own great work is but begun, / What Reason weaves, by Passion is undone” (7). To transcend the corporeal-spiritual dichotomy and rigid rationalism, the Romantics, as Gerald Enscoe points out, see sexual passion “not as an inherently evil force pulling man away from salvation, but as a force which has the possibility of leading him to psychic regeneration” (22).

The pursuit and fulfilment of sexual desire in Romantic poetics thus represent a form of liberation from despotic authorities and a symbol of self-sufficiency. While interpreting the erotic images and motifs in Romanticism, early critics tended to execute a sort of “catharsis” upon sexuality, accentuating the positive effects of sexual love and its metaphorical functions for political and religious purposes. This critical phenomenon is mostly perceivable in Blake studies. Critics whose works have already been “institutionalised” as standard readings, such as Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom, maintain a belief in literature as an alternative sphere above the mundane world. The sphere of literature is constructed self-sufficiently and independently, with literary works exerting mutual influences, in the form of Frye’s archetypal modes or Bloom’s anxiety of influence. That is, their studies

of Romantic poetry entail a sense of detachment from the contemporary historical and cultural contexts, “a deep fear of the actual world, a distaste for history itself,” as Terry Eagleton remarks (*Literary Theory* 81). This sense of detachment from history is one of the features of “Romantic ideologies” that McGann observes in the unified readings of Romantic poetry. Regarding poetry as an independent, elevated and transcendent state of mind or, as Abrams’s Judeo-Christian model demonstrates, an apocalyptic aspiration of a harmonious new world, undoubtedly reflects certain aspects of English Romanticism. But these “ideologies” risk the possibility of metaphorical deflection of the darker sides of Romantic sexuality. Under this somewhat limited scope, the extreme eroticism in the Romantic works is either ignored or sublimated as one of the elements of Romantic “Poetic Genius.”

Perceiving such a deficiency, later researchers have begun to challenge fixed “Romantic ideologies,” in pursuit of more anti-idealist and multilateral interpretations. Alan Richardson, in his 2003 essay “Romanticism and the Body,” notes a critical tendency in late-twentieth century to cast doubts on the established idealist readings of Romantic poetry. As he points out, modern Romantic scholarship has started to approach Romantic sensibility “with a renewed attention to the insistent presence of the body” (4). With the emphasis on more somatic and materialist aspects, recent studies have come to recognise the manifold nature of sexual desire as presented in Romantic poetry, which is part of the critical trend to problematise and reconsider “Romantic ideologies” that have long been established and taken for granted. As mentioned earlier, Mitchell raises the problematic issue of obscenity in Blake’s works, pointing out that it “has been domesticated and sanitized in the name of higher sublimations” by critics like Frye (414). In *Bacchus in Romantic England: Writers and Drink, 1780-1830*, Anya Taylor examines the culture of drinking and intoxication during the Romantic period, arguing for a form of sensual subjectivity that borders on transgression and dissolution. In *Romanticism, Enthusiasm and Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period*, Jon Mee focuses on the concept of enthusiasm in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and

shows that rather than the commonly known “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” emotional sensitivity is actually subtly regulated in Romantic poetry. In *Bloody Romanticism: Spectacular Violence and the Politics of Representation, 1776-1832*, Ian Haywood excavates the artistic portrayals of violence in the nineteenth century. He challenges the widely accepted notion that the Romantics turn away from the disillusioning barbarity of post-Revolution France and seek salvation and novel subjectivity in nature after abandoning political radicalism. In his 2009 monograph *Perverse Romanticism: Aesthetics and Sexuality in Britain, 1750-1832*, Richard Sha approaches Romantic poetry by looking into the contemporary biological and scientific contexts, in order to argue that the so-called “perverse” sexual orientations in English Romanticism actually embody mutual affection and liberation from the purpose of reproduction. The 2010 essay collection *Romanticism and Pleasure*, edited by Thomas H. Schmid and Michelle Faubert, approaches “Romantic pleasure” with “an interest in its somatic and psychological aspects and in its cultural implications and effects” (2). More recently, the two essay collections *Queer Blake* (2010) and *Sexy Blake* (2015) both edited by Helen P. Bruder and Tristanne Connolly, serve as an initial attempt to tackle Blake’s sexual perversity. Espousing a similar critical perspective, this thesis will reconsider violent eroticism and erotic violence, embodied by extreme sexual images and motifs that are commonly dismissed as “obscene,” but which emerge as a unique aesthetic phenomenon of self-annihilation in English Romantic poetry.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXTS OF “THE OBSCENE”

Scholars have addressed the historical and cultural construction of the idea of obscenity in the early modern age, mostly through the inspection of publications in written or graphic forms that depict explicit sexual activities. What constitutes the labelling of certain books as “obscene” is intrinsically associated with the legal practice of censorship, which, is in turn connected with the political contexts in the periods in question. Before the 1857 Obscene Publication Act, whose promoter John Campbell defined the

obscene publications as “works written for the single purpose of corrupting the morals of youth, and of a nature calculated to shock the common feelings of decency in any well-regulated mind” (Kendrick 117), censorship was less concerned with sexual depravity than political subversiveness. In the view of cultural historians such as Walter Kendrick and Lynn Hunt, during the Enlightenment and pre-French Revolution era, “the obscene” is a form of representation of sexuality that gives birth to printed works labelled as “pornography,” whose purpose is to “criticize religious and political authorities” (Hunt, “Introduction,” *The Invention of Pornography* 10) and to undermine “the legitimacy of the ancien régime as a social and political system” (Hunt, “Pornography and the French Revolution” 301). Moreover, as Kendrick points out, in this period “[t]he policing of obscenity, meanwhile, began in haphazardness and developed into chaos” (100). That is, from the legal perspective of censorship, there was no clear definition of what kind of sexual depictions could be regarded as obscene; the so-called “lewd” books and prints were prohibited only because they were “in tandem with abusive polemics” (Kendrick 97). The 1728 case against Edmund Curll perhaps exemplifies this cultural phenomenon. Curll, who stood accused of “printing bawdy stuff” in the Court of King’s Bench was finally acquitted because the “bawdy stuff” lacked the very subversive quality and it was not “against some particular person or persons, or against the government” (Hunt, “Pornography and the French Revolution” 303).

By examining eighteenth-century French pornography, Lucienne Frappier-Mazur explores the effects of the “obscene word” on its readers. She proposes that “the obscene word belongs to a specific lexical category, a vulgar linguistic register associated with the naming of sexual acts and anatomical parts” (205). And the obscene word does not function on its own, but is in need of certain contextualisation to generate its pornographic power. Frappier-Mazur detects three forms of contextualisation necessary for the obscene word: first, the contrast between crudeness and elegance, which is best displayed when lewd words are articulated by aristocracy, especially noble women; second, the location of the obscene word in narration, in

stories; third, the “respective genders of narrators and narratees, of which there are several possible combinations” (207-208). Also, the obscene word claims for “the function of truth,” according to Frappier-Mazur, and “relates to the body and to its drives, and calls up corporeal representations” (213). In other words, with its directness the obscene word penetrates the ordinary language of repression and reveals the truth about human nature and the body. Similarly, Karen Harvey emphasises the very directness of the obscene in her study of eighteenth-century erotica, which she distinguishes from pornography. In her discussion, Harvey points out the two key elements of early-modern pornography: “the *explicit* depiction of sexual *action*” (21). While erotica employs metaphoric and suggestive languages and often continuously defers depictions of actual sex, pornography “negated metaphor and abandoned the figurative in order to achieve a closer mimetic relation to real bodies” (21) and to remove “illusion to reveal the truth” (22). Harvey further notes that the differentiation between suggestiveness and explicitness is a significant indicator for censorship; pornographic prints that explode “any illusion of metaphor” were more likely to face legal action from the government. Echoing Kendrick and Hunt, however, Harvey also highlights that obscene publications were not extensively restricted by censorship, and publishers of “lewd books” were not likely to be formally prosecuted unless they were politically or religiously offensive.

From the perspective of cultural history and censorship, we can notice that “the obscene” is generally associated with pornographic publications, as opposed to the more suggestive and subtle erotica. The nature of pornography is also highly political with the tendency to attack governmental and regal authorities. On the other hand, “the obscene” is merely a form of representation of sexual activities that accentuates explicitness and directness, and has to be situated in specific lexical and narrative contexts to achieve pornographic effects. If obscenity is only a method of representation that constitutes the label of pornography without its own meaning, the case of “the obscene Blake” in Mitchell’s essay remains unsolved. The obscene in Blake’s works, including Mitchell’s example “I saw a chapel all of gold,” as I

observe, concerns the poet's fundamental ideas of sexuality and erotic experience, and how they coexist with other unsecular human activities such as religion and poetic creation. This understanding can be extended to Shelley's and Keats's works and thus sheds light on how "the obscene" exists as an aesthetic phenomenon of self-annihilation in the Romantic texts analysed in this thesis. Thus, I depart from the inspection of pornographic publications and censorship and approach "the obscene" by examining the theological, philosophical and artistic documents in the eighteenth century. I will then engage the idea of the sublime formulated by Edmund Burke and later philosophers and critical theorists in the discussion, in order to reconceptualise the obscene as an aesthetic phenomenon of self-annihilation.

To begin with, "obscene" is a word frequently used in religious texts to describe non-Christian religions. Edward Herbert of Cherbury, in his 1663 *The Antient Religion of the Gentiles* republished in 1711, refers to Juno Lucinas's account of the cult of Venus in ancient Greece: "that obscene Rite of Venus" which is "so very sordid and filthy, that I am ashamed to repeat his words" (67). In his 1740 treatise *Discourses Concerning the Being and Natural Perfection of God*, John Abernethy discusses the pantheism that he regards as heresy. Condemning the pantheist worship of natural objects and creatures as a misconceived elevating of creation to the level of divine creator, Abernethy chastises the pagan ritual as "monstrous absurdity," "so foul, barbarous and obscene, as to be a disgrace to the human nature" (170). In *The History of the American Indians*, a 1775 study showing the difference between the religion of native Indians and traditional pagan religions, including those of Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, and Jews, James Adair praises the American Indians for the purity of their religion, in contrast to the "impure and obscene religious ceremonies of the ancient heathens" (21). In his examination of heretic figures excavated by Bernard de Montfaucon, theologian Nathaniel Lardner describes the figures in question as "obscene and idolatrous" (106). Edward Ryan, an Irish clergyman, remarks in his *The History of the Effects of Religion on Mankind* that "The gods of the Gentiles

were so impure, obscene and detestable” (51). In another religious treatise in 1797 by an anonymous “A. M.,” *Remarks on Revelation & Infidelity*, “obscene” is again used to criticise non-Christian beliefs: “The rites of Bacchus were obscene, ridiculous, and extravagant, in the highest degree; and those of Baal were shocking and unnatural” (186). This treatise also targets Greek philosophers, such as Cleanthes, Chrysippus, Zeno, and Diogenes, in the later part of this treatise. The author lists the “filthy and obscene” conducts defended by these philosophers, including suicide, incest, patricide, cannibalism, and public sex. Benjamin Holloway, in his 1751 *Originals Physical and Theological Sacred and Profane*, similarly denounces heathen deities and the ancient practice of animal worship. In his view, this kind of religion is based on the false veneration for “unclean mechanic Nature” and “obscene anti-sacramental beasts” (259).

From the above account of how “obscene” is employed in religious treatises, several significant connotations of the word emerge. Theologians and clergymen often use the word to undermine the divinity of non-Christian religions that usually espouse sexual desire as a symbol of vitality and fertility. However, the “obscene” has a significance beyond the sexual. Herbert’s strong reaction to the rite of Venus suggests that “the obscene” is something beyond human sensibility, reason, and God-centred morality. This quality of obscenity, reinforced by Abernethy’s definition as “a disgrace to human nature,” corresponds to the etymological source of the word from the Latin *obscenus*, which means “ill-omened, filthy, disgusting, indecent, lewd,” and also the “ob-scena/off-scene” denotation suggested by Roman scholar Marcus Terentius Varro.⁴ In other words, it denotes something unbearable to normal human sensibility, something that should not be seen and named.

⁴ Though the *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that Varro’s explanation of *obscenus* as *ob-scena* is probably a “folk etymology” (“obscene, adj”), the obscene certainly contains this cultural meaning of being unpresentable: something that should be “off-scene.” In 1763, when John Wilkes faced indictment of obscenity for writing *An Essay on Woman*, a pornographic parody of Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Man*, his defence was that he intended not to publish it and that “the public was never to see” this obscene work (Kendrick 98). His defence was not successful because a few printed copies of *An Essay on Woman* did appear and were circulated; that is, the obscene fails to remain “off-scene”—the misplacement constitutes the offense.

Mere depictions of sex are not powerful enough to draw the uneasy feelings associated with the obscene that manifest themselves paradoxically with its unrepresentability. Other theologians' usages of the word indicate more elements that contribute to this quality. Adair's unusual praise of the American Indian religion highlights the concept of "purity" that is the opposite of other pagan religions' obscenity. He particularly refers to the Babylonian temples "where young women prostituted themselves in honour of the goddess," in contrast to American Indian rites in which even "a man known to have gone in to his own wife" was strictly excluded (20-21). The connection between impurity or uncleanness and sex has long been part of the Christian tradition. One of the Church Fathers even laments that *inter faeces et urinam nascimur*.⁵ Adair praises the American Indian religion because it appears to share a similar dichotomy of continence/cleanness-sex/impurity with Christianity. The religious ceremony of a community excludes its "filthy" members "polluted" by sex, in order to maintain the wholeness of its divinity. This movement is analogous to the human body's expulsion of filthy excrements to sustain its healthy self. Human beings must strive to salvage themselves from the wretched state of birth and infancy that is *inter faeces et urinam*; in other words, they must keep themselves away from "filthy" objects to establish their subjectivity. In this sense, the process corresponds to Julia Kristeva's conceptualisation of "abjection."⁶ Hence, the word "obscene" Adair adopts to describe the very opposite of religious purity means more than mere sexual intercourse. What constitutes the conceptualisation of "the obscene" includes the notion of human beings meddling with things that

⁵ "We are born between urine and feces." Sigmund Freud famously mentions this quote in his *Dora*, attributing it to a Church Father. It is also commonly misattributed to St. Augustine. See Ritchie Robertson's note in the Oxford World's Classics edition of *Dora*, p. 107.

⁶ Kristeva's concept of *abjection*, featured in her *Powers of Horror*, illustrates the process of excluding "the abject" in the way of establishing subjectivity. The abject is represented by things other than the "objects" in normal projection of desire: "The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-jest, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire" (1). The abject, similar to the obscene, suggests things that ought to be shunned in order to maintain a healthy self and stable identity in society, things that "disturbs identity, system, order" and do not "respect borders, positions, rules" (4). But there is also a latent human tendency to constantly revisit the abject and to experience the unnameable pleasure in it. The pleasure of a "fascinated victim" that witnesses the dissolution of self and subjectivity echoes the thrilling delight generated by the sublime, which will be discussed in detail in the later part of this introduction.

ought to be separated, in particular anything unclean that is emitted from the human body.

In *Remarks on Revelation and Infidelity*, while using “lewdness” to relate the rite devoted to Venus, the author reserves “obscene” for Bacchus’s rite alongside adjectives such as “ridiculous” and “extravagant.” How does the figure of Bacchus, or Dionysus, reflect the unique propensity of obscenity? Another word associated with Bacchus/Dionysus in and before the eighteenth century is “orgy,” defined in the glossary of a 1767 edition of *Paradise Lost* as “mad rite of Bacchus, frantic revels” (Milton, *The Poetical Works* 329). In his essay “Of Poetry” republished in 1720, Francis Bacon uses “the Orgies of Bacchus” to exemplify madness, which is “affection in the excess,” and “short-liv’d distraction” of superstition. In other words, “the Orgies of Bacchus” deprive human beings of the ability to conduct the “curious Enquiry” of rationalism (185). A much later account is also helpful in illustrating the significance of “the orgies of Bacchus” in relation to the obscene. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche discusses the formation of Greek tragedy as an outcome of the endless battle between two artistic forces represented by two deities, Apollo and Dionysus: “the continuous development of art is bound up with the *Apollinian* and the *Dionysian* duality” (*Basic Writings* 33). The art form that best represents Apollo is sculpture, the “art of the image-maker,” which conveys the ideas of measurement, boundary, and limitation; in contrast, music, “the nonimagistic” art, epitomises the Dionysian, indicating distortion, transgression, and excess. In Nietzsche’s view, these two artistic forces also represent two realms of human mentality: dreams and intoxication. Dreams stand for an ideal sphere of perfect images, which human beings aspire to attain in order to establish subjectivity in reality. Dionysian intoxication, however, reified by the chorus in the Greek tragedy, is a state where the “collapse of the *principium individuationis* occurs,” causing “subjectivity to vanish to the point of complete self-forgetting” (*Basic Writings* 36). According to Arthur Schopenhauer, the *principium individuationis* (“principle of individuation”) is the human faculty based on reason to distinguish empirical objects; in this

instance, the ability to distinguish self from others. Thus, in Dionysian intoxication, human subjects immerse themselves in “the blissful ecstasy that wells from the innermost depths” (*Basic Writings* 36), dissolving the boundary between self and others, subject and objects. In the rites of Dionysus, all identities, social or biological, are annihilated, when the flux of inner drives runs uncontrolled in an excessive manner.

With an eye on Nietzsche’s discourse, we can return to *Remarks on Revelation and Infidelity*, where “obscene” is employed to describe the rites of Bacchus/Dionysus. It is now possible to extract another unique quality of obscenity. The cult of Bacchus is “obscene,” “ridiculous,” and “extravagant,” not only because it features sexual rituals, but also because its worshippers sink into the oblivion of their social identities, or even the biological identity as human beings. Euripides’s description of “Bacchic worship” in *The Bacchae* duly demonstrates this Dionysian self-shattering oblivion; it is “the maddening trance of Dionysus” (195), in which “women go creeping off / This way and that to lonely places and give themselves / To lecherous men (198) and “the sufferings of our unhappy race / Are banished, each day’s troubles are forgotten in sleep” (200). Moreover, Holloway dismisses the heathen animal-worshipping religion as “obscene anti-sacramental” because such a religion forsakes the boundary between humanity and bestiality.

To sum up, what Christian theologians and intellectuals abhor most in “obscene” paganism such as the cult of Bacchus is not infidelity against God, but the indulgence in sexual drives to the extent of self-annihilation. This is intolerable to a Western epistemology centred on reason and self-sufficiency, as Adam Smith observes in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* that “Of all the calamities to which the condition of mortality exposes mankind, the loss of reason appears, to those who have the lease spark of humanity, by far the most dreadful” (15). The phenomenon of self-annihilation triggered by erotic experience, as this thesis will demonstrate, can be explored in the works of Blake, Shelley, and Keats. In Blake’s major poems and Keats’s “The Eve of St. Agnes,” particularly, the erotic experience of self-annihilation is also intricately associated with Christian images and motifs; the sacred and the

erotic are fused and reinforce each other, as Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 will show.

The concept of obscenity can also be found in other contemporary texts, in addition to religious documents. In the sphere of literature and art, obscenity is often employed to describe representations that affront contemporary aesthetics. As Terry Eagleton remarks in his *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, aesthetics was synthesised harmoniously with ethics and politics in the eighteenth century. In this period, there was an extraordinary cultural phenomenon: “Moral standards . . . may thus to some extent diffused into the textures of personal sensibility; taste, affect and opinion testify more eloquently to one’s participation in a universal common sense than either moral strenuousness or ideological doctrine” (*The Ideology of the Aesthetic* 32). That is, in the eighteenth century, morality and aesthetics were united; what is morally good must be aesthetically agreeable, and what is aesthetically agreeable must be morally good. Obscenity, to be viewed against this fixed ideology, was thus presented as a unique “anti-aesthetics” that might threaten the solid connection between morality and good art.

In his 1745 *An Essay upon Poetry and Painting*, Charles Lamotte regards obscenity as a “kind of liberty which painters and poets have too often taken, and which may be called licentious in the highest sense of the word” (184). One of his examples is Parrhasius of Ephesus, an established painter in ancient Greece. Despite his praise of Parrhasius’s “exact observation of the symmetry and proportion of bodies” and “an elevated Genius of sublime fancy,” Lamotte is disappointed that the painter “sometimes debased and degraded his noble pencil with loose and lascivious pieces” (186). Lamotte emphasises obscenity’s negative effect of “corrupting and debauching mankind,” but more significantly, he positions obscenity as the opposite of the aesthetic concept of the “sublime.” In his 1698 anti-theatre treatise *A Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage*, which was reprinted in 1730, Jeremy Collier maintains that “obscenity has not the air of majesty, nor any alliance with the sublime” (121). Furthermore, in the later part of the *Short View*, Collier equalises obscenity

with blasphemy, asking readers about the proper reaction to it: “are you in any rapture about it?” a question that he himself answers, “I doubt not but your blood grows chill, and your ears are stopt at the presumption” (176). These documents suggest that in art and drama, obscenity is a sort of representation that assaults proper human perception. In other words, there is a sense of aggressiveness in the “obscene,” which denies spectators/readers the pleasure that is supposed to be invoked by artistic works.

If Eagleton’s account of the “British eighteenth-century moral sense” is correct, we can see that aesthetic sense of pleasure for the contemporary thinkers is highly moralised. Aesthetics becomes an internal force that contributes to the establishment of an ideology shared by personal feelings and social/political orders:

The aesthetic is in this sense no more than a name for the political unconscious: it is simply the way social harmony registers itself on our senses, imprints itself on our sensibilities. The beautiful is just political order lived out on the body, the way it strikes the eye and stirs the heart.

(*The Ideology of the Aesthetic* 37)

Thus, what is formed in the pre-Romantic period is the internalisation of a set of criteria that regulates the human reaction to artistic representations. From this perspective, a question might be raised: does obscenity truly give its spectator no real pleasure, or does the spectator construe that feeling pleasure is not a proper reaction in the situation, even though to some extent he/she is truly pleased by the depictions of, for instance, suicide, incest, patricide, cannibalism, or public sex, which are listed in *Remarks on Revelation & Infidelity* as obscene? I would argue that the secret pleasure generated by obscenity—religious impurity, orgiastic ecstasy, and dehumanisation, all representations considered obscene in eighteenth-century moral sensitivity and religious ideology—does share a subtle similarity with the delight evoked by “the sublime,” an aesthetic phenomenon that is often placed in opposition to obscenity.

Before Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* published in 1757, what was more widely known about the sublime in the eighteenth century was Longinus's *On the Sublime*, translated into English by Leonard Welsted and William Smith respectively in 1712 and 1739, or the reference to Longinus in John Dennis's 1701 *Advancement and Reformation of Poetry* and 1704 *Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (Fyfe 155). In *On the Sublime*, Longinus lists five elements that constitute the feelings of the sublime: "Boldness and Grandeur in the Thoughts," "the Pathetic," "a skilful Application of Figures," "a noble and graceful Expression," and "the Structure or Composition of the Periods in all possible Dignity and Grandeur" (Longinus 11).⁷ Among these five elements, "the Pathetic," which is equivalent to "the Power of raising the Passions to a violent and even enthusiastic degree," is the most significant one concerning the relationship between the sublime and the obscene. Longinus has clear differentiation between the "high" and "low" passions, the latter including "Lamentation, Sorrow, and Fear," which are "vastly different from grandeur, and are in themselves of a low degree" (Longinus 13). Longinus's discourse on the natural sense of the sublime lingers on such a division between high and low passions. While discussing these low passions incurred by natural violence, Longinus highlights the poetic method that transforms and elevates them to the higher passions. For example, he praises Homer's method of elevating the lower passions in a description of a ship trapped on a stormy sea:

But instead of increasing the Terror, he only lessens and refines it away; and besides, he sets a bound to the impending Danger, by saying, a *Plank preserves them*, thus banishing their Despair. (Longinus 23)

For Longinus, the sublime of natural power does generate the low passions of fear and affliction. It is necessary, however, that they are well contained and prevented from degenerating into despair, an ill-proportioned,

⁷ Longinus's text is cited from the 1740 edition of *Dionysus Longinus on the Sublime* translated by William Smith.

uncontrolled, and chaotic state. Further, it is crucial that such low passions should be replaced by hope and joy: the high passions of pleasure and agreeableness. Eighteenth-century writers, while referring to the sublime in discussions about art, literature, or theatre, are generally concerned with the particular passions incited in the reader/spectator. The antithesis between the sublime and the obscene that Lamotte and Collier raise in their works is based on this division of high and low passions, for in their view the obscene can only produce the low passions, which are altogether unpleasant and offensive to common sensibility, and therefore inartistic and immoral. The negative feelings generated by obscenity are considered “socially disruptive” to eighteenth-century aesthetics, according to Eagleton, “as instantly offensive as a foul smell” (*The Ideology of the Aesthetic* 38). However, those same feelings come to be recognised by later writers as significant elements in the sublime, especially in Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry*.

Prior to Burke, William Smith discusses “Images of Terror” in the notes to his English translation of Longinus’s *On the Sublime*. Smith refers to the “foul and nauseous Representations” in poetry and painting that should be properly obscured so that they will not “offend the Sight.” He argues that “What is terrible cannot be described too well; what is disagreeable should not be described at all” (Longinus 95). This statement conforms to Longinus’s excluding of the “low” passions from the sublime. In *On the Sublime*, Longinus generally associates images of terror with natural landscapes, such as ferocious tempests, howling storms, and fathomless deeps. But Smith enlarges the scope of terror by including human suffering caused by human violence in his notes: “When Apelles drew the Pourtrait of Antigonus, who had lost an Eye, he judiciously took his Face in profile, that he might hide the Blemish” (Longinus 95). Both the terror of nature and the terror imposed upon humans by other humans bring forth the sense of fear and pain. The difference between these two kinds of representation lies in the moral obligation implanted in the collective consciousness of the eighteenth-century sensibility. The pleasure generated by viewing a sea savaged by a fierce storm would not be considered improper, but it would be offensive if someone

said that he took pleasure in viewing people tortured on the rack. The scene of extreme violence that “offends the sight” and attacks common feelings of morality, as Smith argues, ought to be concealed properly in narratives and on stage. Thus, it reflects the off-stage/unpresentable propensity of obscenity. However, Smith also admits that “[t]here is a serious turn, an inborn sedateness in the Mind, which renders Images of Terror grateful and engaging” (Longinus 95). The phrase “an inborn sedateness in the Mind” is significant. The word “inborn” indicates that a part of human nature is attached to terror, in this case the images of violence and suffering. The phrase “sedateness in the Mind” suggests that human beings are capable of surveying and relishing terror in a calm and disinterested manner. This capability of purely artistic appreciation of terror is beyond the restraint of morality and sensibility. Smith’s statement signifies an initial breakdown of the antithesis between the sublime and the obscene in the eighteenth century. It also dissolves the eighteenth-century synthesis of aesthetics and morality, indicating that pain is no longer the downright and taken-for-granted opposite of pleasure. To further explicate the intriguing affinity between the obscene and the sublime, the following section will focus on Burke’s later elaboration of the sublime, greatly influenced by Smith’s translation and notes on Longinus (Boulton xvii). It will also explicate how obscenity is associated with the sublime as a unique aesthetic phenomenon that is worth exploring in the literary works of the Romantic period.

In Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, the source of the sublime is “[w]hatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger . . . whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects” (39). Pain, because of its association with the human will for preservation, generates the strongest emotion, and therefore presents itself as a more profound feeling than pleasure. In Burke’s view, the emotional reaction one can have to pain and danger is even more intense than sexual attraction. In this case, he refers to Robert Francis Damien’s brutal torture and execution for attempting to assassinate Louis XV. Damien’s torture appears to support Burke’s argument

that pain is more powerful than pleasure. Notably, Damien's case is a sheer display of cruelty; there is no characteristic of nobleness, elegance, or loftiness—elements that are accentuated in the earlier discourse on the sublime. By evoking this incident, Burke implies that viewing pure violence imposed upon human bodies generates "delight," which represents sensual gratification that differs from "positive pleasure." But such "delight" can only be maintained in the condition of a proper distance:

When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful. (*Enquiry* 40)

The spectacle of direct degradation and maiming of human bodies brings forth delight only as long as the spectator feels certain about his own safety. Once the spectator acknowledges that he will never suffer the same fate as the wretch on the rack, he can relish with strong delight the sensation of pain and danger, which to himself are only imaginary and fictional as artistic or literary works. In the face of terror such as Damien's corporeal plight, the spectator first feels pain, which is produced by his own imagination, then fear that he may be in the same misery someday in the future, and finally delight once he confirms his security.

However, the feeling of security serves merely as a condition of delight generated by viewing terrible brutality; it is never the cause *per se* of such delight that might be deemed perverse or obscene: "it is absolutely necessary my life should be out of any imminent hazard before I can take a delight in the sufferings of others . . . But it is a sophism to argue from thence, that this immunity is the cause of my delight either on these or on any occasions" (48). Burke has no empirical answer to why people enjoy watching sights that are disagreeable and ought to be shunned. He can only attribute it to divine Providence: "as our Creator has designed we should be united by the bond of sympathy, he has strengthened that bond by a proportionable delight" (46). In God's design, human beings must be bound together by "love and social affection," so he grants considerable pleasure in viewing others' suffering to ensure that people don't shun the misery that

they witness. Such a mechanism is the source of sympathy in Burke's view. While Burke recognises the intense delight produced by terror, he refuses to admit that it is human nature to take great pleasure in viewing others' misery. By linking such delight to sympathy, he elevates it to the level of religious decree and pragmatic social function, in order to conform to the contemporary moral sensibility and social ideologies. Despite this elevation, Burke explores the sublime as the representation of terror, which includes the degradation and maiming of the human body. This marks a breakdown of the eighteenth-century combination of morality and aesthetics. From this perspective, the obscene as the images of heretic blasphemy, orgiastic ecstasy and brutality—the utter antithesis of the sublime in eighteenth-century writers' view—in fact has much similarity with Burke's idea of the sublime. Both the obscene and the sublime stimulate a powerful aesthetic sensation through the representations of violence and bodily pain.

The concept of power in Burke's formulation of the sublime reflects the mechanism of desire. Burke maintains that power invokes the feeling of the sublime because it represents a superior force that overwhelms the spectator, posing a potential threat to his well-being. This power subdues the spectator's "will," forcing him to submit to its dominance. Consequently, a unique sort of delight, different from normal pleasures, emerges in the spectator's mentality. The "will" Burke refers to here signifies the basic biological needs of human beings and the conditions that enable them to stay properly in society. In other words, it is the "will" to neutralise conflicts and construct order that is necessary for social harmony. The aesthetic delight from the sublime, in this sense, insinuates an alternative dark "will" to challenge this "will of necessity." Burke further illustrates this "will against the will" in the face of a beast of enormous power:

Is it that this strength will be subservient to you, to your ease, to your pleasure, to your interest in any sense?
No; the emotion you feel is, lest this enormous strength should be employed to the purpose of rapine and destruction.
(*Enquiry* 65)

Power contributes to the feeling of the sublime because it endangers the spectator's normal self, whose physical health and mental subjectivity must

be sustained in society. The delight brought out here is strongest when the spectator imagines his normal self being destroyed by such power. Burke's comparison between the powers of ox and bull elicits another crucial factor of the aesthetic experience of the sublime that can be linked to eroticism and obscenity: uselessness, or anti-pragmatism. Both beasts possess great strength. However, an ox cannot generate the awesome power that a bull does, because the former "is an innocent creature, extremely serviceable" while the latter is "very destructive, seldom of any use in our business" (65). That is, the artistic delight generated by power is weakened by practical functions and their purposiveness. Such a delight, in contrast, reflects an alternative desire to see things destroyed by the powerful in a violent and unproductive way. Hence, Burke's conceptualisation of the sublime presents a new aesthetics that runs against the eighteenth-century synthesis of politics, ethics, and art. From this perspective, the contemporary concept of obscenity actually reflects a similar artistic spirit of uselessness and anti-pragmatism, as in *Remarks on Revelation and Infidelity* the obscene rite of Bacchus is called "extravagant." This word properly describes the ritual orgy featured in the Dionysian rite, where bodily energy is consumed excessively without the justifying function of procreation. The aesthetics of the sublime resonates with the obscene; both point to the transcendence of the mundane world of function and necessity. Such a mechanism also anticipates the later anthropological and philosophical division between the secular and the sacred initiated by Émile Durkheim and illustrated by Georges Bataille.⁸ I will engage Bataille's theory extensively with the discussion of obscenity in Blake's poetry in Chapter 1.

Burke's account of power as the major source of the sublime further evokes some aspects associated with sexuality, making the sublime more

⁸ In his *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Émile Durkheim defines religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions—beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church" (46). This concept provides the basis for Georges Bataille's philosophy. The divine domain of religion in Bataille becomes also the realm of art, literature, and eroticism that goes beyond the secular world controlled by "the order of things," the order of working and production.

allied with the obscene, even though the two are opposed to each other in other contemporary documents concerning art and morality. Burke directly refers to sexual desire in *A Philosophical Enquiry* while discussing the concept of beauty, an aesthetic phenomenon that is antithetical to the sublime. After defining beauty as “that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it” (91), he urgently distinguishes love from “desire or lust; which is an energy of the mind, that hurries us on to the possession of certain objects, that do not affect us as they are beautiful, but by means altogether different” (91). Burke’s efforts to separate love from sexual desire, as Tom Furniss points out, are hardly successful, because Burke’s account of the beautiful is highly attached to bodily appetite, and is therefore highly erotic (Furniss 34). As Anne K. Mellor’s discussion in *Romanticism and Gender* shows, Burke elucidates the idea of the beautiful by analysing the female body, especially neck and breasts, parts that are iconic of femininity (107-109). Isaac Kramnick also suggests that Burke models the sublime on his stern and unloving father, and the beautiful on his gentle and delicate mother (*Romanticism and Gender* 87). The dualism of the sublime/masculine and the beautiful/feminine in the *Enquiry* brings forth prominent aspects of obscenity, as the following discussion will demonstrate.

For Burke, the contrast between pleasure and delight is essential in this dualism. The former is generated by the beautiful and the latter by the sublime. These two sorts of sensual enjoyment indicate the contrary positions of subjectivity and objectivity. In the face of the beautiful, which is presented by the images of smallness, smoothness, gradual variation, and delicacy, the spectator is in the superior position of active desiring as a controlling subject. The pleasure given to the spectator in this situation is self-centred and self-empowered, solidifying his subjectivity. In this case, the spectacle submits to the spectator, as Burke puts it: “we submit to what we admire, we love what submits to us” (*Enquiry* 113). In light of Mellor’s interpretation, the term “love” here suggests the power relationship between a dominant masculinity and a submissive femininity. In contrast, the

emotional reaction to that which we “admire” in the sublime is essentially different from “love.” While viewing images of the sublime, the “admiring” spectator moves from the active position to the passive one. By doing so, he exposes his inferiority and submits to the power and terror that threaten to destroy his well-being. In this case, the spectator departs from the controlling position, in which he “loves” the beautiful. Instead, he forsakes his original masculinity and takes on the role of passive femininity—conventional trait of the beautiful. In this passive position, the spectator’s subjectivity is weakened, belittled, and eventually annihilated. The delight in this process is self-obliterating and self-annihilating, as the spectator forsakes his masculine identity constructed firmly in the reason-based eighteenth-century ideology of civic gentry. Moreover, the spectator of the sublime indulges in the feminine ecstasy of self-oblivion that resembles the obscene rite of Bacchus/Dionysus: “we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated” (*Enquiry* 68). Therefore, in the operation of the sublime, there is a process of potential transsexuality, the subversion of traditional gender roles. The spectator’s drastic shift of position from active subjectivity to passive objectivity associates the aesthetic experiences of the beautiful and the sublime with sadomasochism, which is a form of eroticism based on mental and physical violence in the power relationship between the dominant and the dominated. The subtle dynamics between the sublime, transsexuality, and sadomasochism will be discussed in detail in Chapter 1, where Blake’s epic poem *Milton* is examined from this perspective.

A few decades later, the violence of the French Revolution became the epitome of Burke’s aesthetics of sublime terror. As Ian Haywood remarks, the plebeian attack on Marie Antoinette’s palace “shows the masculine sublime terrorizing feminine beauty” (66). Burke is perhaps aware of the potential danger that the aesthetics of the sublime might pose against his social and political conservatism. In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke laments that in France “the age of chivalry is gone.” He embarks on moderating the sublime with the beautiful and softening the masculine with certain feminine propensities, propounding positive (but somewhat

paradoxical) terms such as “proud submission” and “dignified obedience” that “kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom” (*Reflections* 76). In *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke clearly considers the sublime aesthetically superior to the beautiful. However, in *Reflections*, he mitigates the sublime to conform to his reactionary conservatism and to espouse social stability. This transition underscores the disparity between aesthetic experiences and eighteenth-century moral sentiments.

In Immanuel Kant’s later analysis of the sublime, the danger of self-annihilation in the Burkean sublime is a problem that awaits a solution, as he deems Burke’s *Enquiry* “a merely empirical exposition of the sublime and beautiful” (107). In Kant’s view, Burke’s discourse of the sublime is limited by sensual perception and bodily reaction. This limitation results in the failure to strengthen human subjectivity and denies spiritual elevation. Consequently, the human subject is unable to obtain the phenomenon-transcending *Ding an sich*: the “Thing-in-itself.” In *Critique of Judgment*, Kant acknowledges the sublime as the source of a “negative pleasure” with which the spectator feels that his life is being threatened, a pleasure “brought about by feeling of a momentary check to the vital forces” (76). Espousing morality and rationalism as the highest human faculties, Kant maintains that human perception of the sublime is still subject to the power of reason: “For the sublime, in the strict sense of the word, cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason” (76). Kant seeks to restore lost human subjectivity in the face of the Burkean sublime. In order to accomplish this, he first confines the sublime to the scope of natural grandeur, excluding human violence and suffering. Such a manoeuvre enables the spectator to rediscover his subjectivity in nature, with an ensuing pleasure that conforms to the Kantian moral and rational aesthetics. In contrast to Burke’s and other previous concepts, Kant proposes that the sublime is a unique spiritual propensity that has already existed in the human heart, “evoked by a particular representation engaging the attention of reflective judgment, and not the object, that is to be called sublime” (81). It is reason, not imagination, that constitutes the human capacity to perceive the sublime. Rather than

admitting the submissive and potentially self-annihilating position of the spectator who encounters the sublime, Kant stresses the process of “subreption”—“substitution of a respect for the object in place of one for the idea of humanity in our own self—the subject” (88). Instead of succumbing to the obscene pleasure of self-annihilation, the Kantian subject elevates himself and identifies with the natural grandeur. Kantian identification with nature is perfectly exemplified and embodied in Caspar David Friedrich’s painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, in which the human subject is not only equal to natural grandeur, but is even superior to it.

Kant’s idea of the natural sublime and his championing of human subjectivity evoked by it are manifested in William Wordsworth’s poetry, in which “the universe is not mechanical and dead, but alive and vitally connected with the human mind; awakened consciousness leads to an awakened moral sense and must lead to communion with the divine” (Gill xviii). Considering the relationship between the spectator and the spectacle, Wordsworth emphasises the former’s active role. In “The Ruined Cottage,” Wordsworth speaks through the Armytage’s voice:

. . . We die, my Friend,
Nor we alone, but that which each man loved
And prized in his peculiar nook of earth
Dies with him or is changed, and very soon
Even of the good is no memorial left. (68-72)

Natural sublimity is only meaningful when it is perceived by human beings, and the spectacle ceases to be when the spectator is gone. Human subjectivity, as Wordsworth believes, is the controlling factor in the process of spectating the sublime. At the end of Book 13 of *The Prelude*, human subjectivity is elevated to the extent of surpassing the sublimity of nature:

Instruct them how the mind of man becomes
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
On which he dwells, above this Frame of things
(Which, ‘mid all revolutions in the hopes
And fears of men, doth still remain unchanged)
In beauty exalted, as it is itself
Of substance and of fabric more divine. (13.446-452)⁹

⁹ The text of *The Prelude* quoted here is from the 1805 thirteenth-book version in *The Major Works* edited by Stephen Gill.

In this passage, Wordsworth goes beyond Kantian subreption; human subjectivity not only identifies with the natural sublime, but also triumphs over it, entering a state of supreme divinity. The Kantian/Wordsworthian appreciation of the natural sublime is sublimated and free from the danger of the loss of subjectivity and self-annihilation, whereas such a danger is the very essence of obscenity hidden in the Burkean sublime. On the other hand, in the works of Blake, Shelley, and Keats, the obscene, unrepresentable, and more somatic aspects of the sublime can be observed and further explored.

In his reconsideration of the Kantian sublime, Jean-François Lyotard's definition of the sublime stresses its off-scene/unrepresentable quality that can be connected with the obscene. In Lyotard's formulation, the sublime is differentiated from the pleasure derived from "taste," which demonstrates "an accord between the capacity to conceive and the capacity to present an object corresponding to the concept" (19). The sublime, however, is engendered when such an accord fails to function. In other words, the sublime represents certain ideas and phenomena of extreme power and immensity that can only be perceived, but cannot be presented, for any attempted presentations are doomed to be "sadly lacking to us" (Lyotard 20). The "unrepresentable" ideas of the sublime thus also "prohibit the free accord of the faculties that produce the feeling of the beautiful" and "obstruct the formation and stabilization of taste" (20). As Burke proposes, "taste"—the capacity to appreciate artistic beauty—is constituted by "our judgement, by extending our knowledge, by a steady attention to our object" (*Enquiry* 26). Sublimity that deforms and destabilise taste thus operates against reason and knowledge, whose absence threatens the human subjectivity and selfhood.

Slavoj Žižek, in his *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, similarly observes that "the sublime object evokes pleasure in a purely negative way" (230) by exposing its very unrepresentability and the impossibility to attain the "Thing-in-itself," the Kantian metaphysical truth. The spiritual elevation in the sublime, for Žižek, is only a piece of negative evidence of "the non-existence of the transcendent Thing-in-itself as a positive entity" (233). The quest after

idealist transcendence and subjectivity through the sublime, such as the Kantian process of “subreption,” is destined to fail and to eventually “embody itself again in some miserable, radically contingent corporeal leftover” (234). The “off-stage-ness” of obscenity, to some extent, corresponds to Lyotard’s conceptualisation of the sublime as “unpresentable” and Žižek’s construal of the sublime as a negative phenomenon of spiritual void and abject bodily remnant. Specific erotic images are considered obscene, because once they are presented, brought back “onto the stage,” they affront and assault human perception and sensibility, and further suspend the accord between faculties and annihilate human subjectivity, as the “unpresentable” sublime works. From a post-Lacanian psychoanalytical view, the “obscene” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries anticipates the “abject,” which, as Kristeva reasons, signifies pre-lingual and pre-paternal desires expelled from the symbolic order, and “ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (1), in order for a human individual to solidify self as a subject, and establish a socially acceptable identity.

Leo Bersani’s reconsideration of the Freudian model of sexuality perhaps serves as a final theoretical foundation for my definition of the obscene as an aesthetic phenomenon of self-annihilation. Bersani notes the unresolved condition in Freud’s theorisation of erotogenic pleasure, which contains a sense of “tension” that necessarily involves pain. This feeling of tension emerges with a drive to alter the psychological state of the human subject. In Bersani’s view, Freud finds it difficult to reconcile the lingering “tension” of pain with the final “pleasure of discharge” of genital sexuality (*The Freud Body* 33). In sexual experience, the former somehow outweighs the latter, and “the mysterious repetition (and even intensification) of something unpleasurable is explicitly seen as inherent in sexuality” (34). Freud’s struggle here, as Bersani observes, leads to his uncertain definition and placement of sadomasochism in his model. To resolve this problem, Bersani expands and elucidates Freud’s idea that sexual excitement is a “byproduct” of extreme bodily and mental conditions even in pain or distress by proposing that “the pleasurable unpleasurable tension of sexual

excitement occurs when the body's 'normal' range of sensation is exceeded, and when the organization of the self is momentarily disturbed" (38). For Bersani, what is truly crucial in sexuality is the idea that erotic experience "is intolerable to the structured self" and "could be thought of as a tautology for masochism" (39). He adds that "sexuality would not be originally an exchange of intensities between individuals, but rather a condition of broken negotiations with the world, a condition in which others merely set off the self-shattering mechanisms of masochist *jouissance*" (41). Bersani's formulation of sexuality as "self-shattering" processes corresponds to the meaning of obscenity elicited from eighteenth-century documents as the breakdown of existing identities, social and biological. It also foregrounds the idea that sexual desire is not always based on positive mutual affections between individuals, but rather on the tendency to self-annihilation, a phenomenon that can be explored in the works of Blake, Shelley, and Keats. In his later *Is The Rectum a Grave*, Bersani again stresses the inherence of violence in sexuality that is directed at human subjectivity and selfhood with a strong tendency to become powerless and to lose control: "a more radical disintegration and humiliation of the self" (24). This is exactly the mental condition of the spectator of the Burkean sublime: "we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated" (*Enquiry* 68). Once again, the mechanisms of the obscene and the sublime overlaps in this particular aspect of self-annihilation, which indicates the intimacy between eroticism and artistic creation, an idea that will be postulated in the main chapters on Blake, Shelley, and Keats.

With the historical tracing of eighteenth-century texts and the involvement of later philosophical and theoretical works on the sublime and sexuality, it is now possible to provide a specific definition of "the obscene." It denotes a kind of human experience of extreme bodily and mental conditions, which triggers the drastic dislocation of subject and object, the violent alteration of human subjectivity that disintegrates the existing identities. The very extreme conditions consist of religious ecstasy, as the eighteenth-century theological documents suggest, the encounter with the sublime that not only includes

natural grandeur but the “unpresentable” violence upon the human body and the potential transsexual, self-destructive complex, and erotic activities that are, in Bersani’s words, intrinsically masochist and self-shattering. This “obscene” experience is represented in the works of Blake, Shelley, and Keats as a heterogeneous aesthetic phenomenon of self-annihilation.¹⁰ As the three poets approach the “extreme conditions” of blasphemy, defilement, rape, transsexuality, incest, murder, cannibalism, and necrophilia, the specific works discussed in this thesis represent an alternative aspect of Romantic sexuality that empowers poetic creation not through positive affection, but violence and self-destruction.

“THE OBSCENE” IN ROMANTIC POETRY: BLAKE, SHELLEY, AND KEATS

This thesis has chosen the three male poets not only because their works focus on the motifs that can be deemed obscene, but also because they all assume a socially positive role as a poet, a downright masculine identity. Blake aspires to become a prophet-poet in biblical tradition, the Bard “Who present, past, & future sees” (“introduction,” *The Songs of Experience*, *CPPB* 18). Shelley sets his heart on a poet who is “the unacknowledged legislators of the World” (*A Defence of Poetry*, *MW* 698) that can reform the world in constant amelioration. Keats, though often attacked for his effeminacy, sees the image of a poet as “a sage; / A humanist, physician to all men” who “pours out a balm upon the world” (*The Fall of Hyperion* 1.189-190, 201 *PJK* 483). However, while endeavouring to establish these socially positive roles of the poet as prophet, legislator, and physician, they disintegrate these masculine identities in their representation of the obscene motifs and images. The “obscene” as the aesthetic phenomenon of self-

¹⁰ My usage of the term “heterogeneous” derives from Bataille’s distinction between homogeneity and heterogeneity. The homogeneous world is based on ordinary and secular activities that aim to accumulate resources and sustain living. The heterogeneous is a mystical realm only accessed through human experience that serves no useful purpose: religious ritual, erotic interaction without the aim of reproduction, and artistic creation. These heterogeneous activities all signify *plethora*, the violent consumption of effervescent energy that dissolves the boundary between individuals, between subject and object, with a tendency of self-annihilation: “Life is essentially extravagant, drawing on its forces and its reserves unchecked; unchecked it annihilates what it has created . . . in the end we resolutely desire that which imperils our life” (*Eroticism* 86).

annihilation gains its highest impetus when the poets and their male heroes forsake the masculine identities they originally aspire to, and undergo the process of transsexuality, which can be explored especially in Blake's *Milton*, Shelley's *Laon and Cythna*, and Keats's interaction with his contemporary critics.

Chapter 1 focuses on Blake's poetry and design. Blake's own mythological system is a sexualised revision of the Christian narrative based on the Bible. It is commonly argued, as mentioned in the beginning of this introduction, that Blake re-includes sexual desire into Christianity. That is, he rejects the virtue of virginity and ascetic tradition, which are promoted by Christian doctrines, as the "perversion" of Jesus Christ's true words. While championing sexual desire as a positive drive to individual, religious, and political liberation, Blake also presents sex as a form of violence that results in defilement and sacrilege, rape, sadomasochism, autoeroticism, and transsexuality. In the first section, I will first examine "I saw a chapel all of gold" to redefine Blake's obscenity—a problematic aspect that cannot be resolved according to Mitchell—as an essential theological and psychological synthesis of eroticism and sacredness, by involving Georges Bataille's idea of *l'érotisme sacré*. In the second section of Chapter 1, I will then consider *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. My reading departs from the existing studies of the poem that generally focus on its criticism of plantation slavery, its allegorical rebellion against religious continence and moral conservatism, and Blake's possible sexism and misogyny. Instead, I inspect Blake's designs of "obscene" and "abnormal" sexual pleasures, which are imbedded in Oothoon's and Theotormon's voice and imagination. By highlighting the possible influences from Erasmus Darwin's botanic poetics in *The Loves of the Plants*, Samuel-Auguste Tissot's *On Onanism* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Confessions*, I propose that Blake engages with these contemporaries to present an "obscene" picture of highly heterogeneous erotic images, including promiscuity, autoeroticism, and sadomasochism. The final section of Chapter 1 focuses on Blake's later epic poem *Milton*, as well as several plates in his illustration of the Book of Job. Blake's poetic and

pictorial designs display a deliberate degradation of the contemporary idea of English masculinity. Through the “obscene” feminisation of traditional masculine protagonists, such as Satan, Job, and even Blake himself as a national bard, Blake exposes the subversive dimensions of the sublime, which annihilate established identities, social and biological. The images and motifs in these works— “I saw a chapel all of gold,” *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, and *Milton*—correspond to my conceptualisation of the obscene as an aesthetic phenomenon of self-annihilation.

Chapter 2 focuses on Percy Bysshe Shelley’s tragedy *The Cenci* and epic poem *Laon and Cythna*, introduced with an analysis of *A Defence of Poetry*. In the *Defence*, I first identify Shelley’s struggle toward the reconciliation between two aspects in poetry: one is based on love and sympathy to envision a better state of the material world; the other is empowered by madness, ecstasy, anti-knowledge, and unconsciousness. In the *Defence*, Shelley endeavours to contain the latter with the former, in order to justify poetry’s necessity for human happiness and the poet’s status as “the unacknowledged legislators of the World” (MW 698). However, it is questionable whether such a goal is reached and such a “socially positive” unilateral generalisation of poetry is really displayed in Shelley’s artistic creation. To address this question, I explore Shelley’s composition of *The Cenci* in relation to his source materials and other literary works. In the characterisation of the Count, Shelley draws from Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* and the Byronic hero, thus granting him considerable charisma as Milton’s Satan. With his innovations concerning the Count’s atrocities, Shelley suggestively brings forth the “obscene/off-stage” father-daughter incest as an essential literary and aesthetic motif of evil assimilation and incorporation. Shelley’s frequent allusions to *Macbeth* testify to the effect of the Count’s dark conceit and Beatrice’s unconscious identification with her villainous father. In the climactic trial scene, Shelley further degrades the character of Beatrice in her confrontation with Marzio, rendering her both morally and aesthetically problematic. Shelley’s innovation of Count Cenci’s other atrocities reinforces the incest motif, and attests to the poet’s latent inclination to the alternative

aspect of poetry. That is, the major dramatic impetus of *The Cenci* is based on the negative poetics that dissolves all social bonds/boundaries, rather than the positive poetics of love and sympathy Beatrice (or Shelley himself, consciously or not) fails to represent. In the second section of the Chapter 2, I focus on Shelley's longest epic poem *Laon and Cythna*. I examine not only Shelley's design of sibling incest, but also the protagonists' mental transformations that parallel their incestuous love and the process of revolution. Even though the sibling incest in *Laon and Cythna* is a positive form of Romantic sexuality and one of the most powerful epitomes of Shelleyan sympathy, Shelley still employs the "obscene" poetics of self-annihilation that is manifested in an erotic poetics of suffering and madness. Through the "obscene" experiences of bodily torture, imaginative cannibalism, incest, and rape, Laon and Cythna undergo chaotic processes of "brainless fantasy" and "sense of senselessness." In these processes, they annihilate their previous identities to close in to Shelley's ideal of individuality based on love and sympathy, which he believes can be extended to the entirety of human society. Shelley might fail to achieve the final aim with this epic, but his erotic poetics of suffering and madness exemplify the aesthetic phenomenon of self-annihilation—the obscene side of English Romantic works.

Chapter 3 focuses on John Keats's two narrative poems: "Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil," and "The Eve of St. Agnes." As Jeffrey N. Cox points out, it is widely thought that "Keats created a kind of anti-romance capable of confronting the sorrows of life beyond the wish-fulfilling enchantments offered by conventional romances" in his 1820 volume *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems* (KPP 410). In the introduction of Chapter 3, I examine several key letters, including the significant "Epistle" to John Hamilton Reynolds, to consider Keats's feminisation in his poetry—a tendency criticised and derided by his contemporaries—as a necessary phenomenon for Keats. Feminisation, as I propose, corresponds to Keats's understanding of poetic creation as a process of transcending the poet's existing identity and subjectivity. This is a pathological process of self-

corrosion, which can be observed and explored in “Isabella” and “The Eve of St. Agnes,” and attest to the Romantic obscenity of self-annihilation. In my reading of “Isabella,” with a cross-examination of Boccaccio’s original text and John Florio’s English translation, I argue that Keats actually downplays the violent interference of the two brothers. In other words, the negativity of erotic love between Isabella and Lorenzo is an innate phenomenon of self-annihilation, represented by Keats’s unique pathological poetics. In the final section of Chapter 3, I then survey “The Eve of St. Agnes,” which presents a heterogeneous phenomenon of “Keatsian sacredness”—a synthesis of the religious and the erotic. Paying specific attention to Keats’s design of religious, especially Christian, motifs and images such as sacrifice, fasting, and the enigmatic reference to Mary Magdalene, I dismiss the oft-assumed dichotomy between Porphyro/the rapist and Madeline/the rape victim, and highlight the mutual annihilation of self and subjectivity in the erotic ritual of St. Agnes. This chapter on Keats will explicate Keats’s idea of poetic creation as a process that shares the same root with erotic love and religious experience. All these three dimensions of human mentality entail the dissolution of somatic and psychological orders, which in turn result in self-annihilation and the collapse of subjectivity—the very essence of “the obscene” in English Romantic poetry.

Michel Foucault, in his introduction to *The History of Sexuality*, casts doubt upon the so-called “repressive hypothesis,” arguing that instead of repression and silence, the nineteenth-century culture witnessed a “dissemination and implantation of polymorphous sexualities” (12) and a “veritable discursive explosion” (17) of sexuality. Although I do not approach Romantic poetry through a Foucauldian viewpoint, which focuses on how power and knowledge formulate certain socially instrumental discourses on sexuality, I observe that in Romantic poetry, there are indeed “polymorphous” forms of eroticism that correspond to contemporary discourses on sexualities. The “obscene” aspects and erotic subject in Romantic poetry challenge the unilateral formulation of sex as an emblem of mutual affection and personal liberation. In his later works, Foucault also deals with the issue

of subjectivity. In his view, through the discourses of sexualities, human experiences are constituted for individuals to “recognize themselves as subjects of a ‘sexuality,’ which was accessible to very diverse fields of knowledge and linked to a system of rules and constraints” (*The Use of Pleasure* 4). Through this process, a sexual “desiring subject” is established to construct a positive relationship with the self, which allows them to “discover, in desire, the truth of their being” (5). This subject of sexuality, as Foucault proposes, executes a “hermeneutics of desire” that relies upon “arts of existence,” and “techniques of the self (10-11). The management of one’s sexual desire becomes the manifestation of wisdom and truth, and one’s subjectivity to exist in an aura of harmony and aesthetics in human society. While acknowledging Foucault’s theorisation of the “desiring subject” of sexuality, my discussion of the “erotic subjects” in Romantic poetry reveals an “obscene” disruption of such Foucauldian harmonious “care of the self.” As my examinations of Blake, Shelley, and Keats will lay bare, what these poets covertly convey is in essence “arts of anti-existence” and “techniques of self-annihilation,” especially when the Romantic subjects undergo the experiences of erotic love, religious sacredness, and poetic creation. Such are the scholarly positions that this thesis should present finally, which, in my critical estimation, could also be used to intervene in the debate over moral and artistic judgment concerning works of popular culture, or even the erotica/pornography of our time.

CHAPTER 1

William Blake: Sacredness, Violence, and Degraded Masculinity

INTRODUCTION: *L'ÉROTISME SACRÉ* IN "I SAW A CHAPEL ALL OF GOLD"

To consider sexuality in Blake's works, one inevitably has to consider it in the context of religion. The dynamic between sexual desire and religion is pervasive in his corpus starting from the seemingly carefree *Songs of Innocence*, the allegorical continental prophecies, to the epic construction of *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. Blake, as an avid reader of the Bible, seeks to rectify the distortions and errors caused by what he calls "state religion"—the institutionalised Christianity—as well as Deism, or natural religion, that is supported by Newton's scientific formulations.¹¹ The re-inclusion of sexual desire is one of the most prominent methods that Blake adopts to accomplish his Christian revisionism. In the beginning of *Songs of Experience*, the Bard, "Who Present, Past, & Future sees" (CPPB 18),¹² eagerly calls for the return of Earth—an archetype of paganist Mother Nature that represents sexual vitality—to accuse the "Cruel jealous selfish" father-God of repressing sexual delight. In *America: a Prophecy*, an allegory of the American Revolution, Orc rises from the Atlantic sea as a sexualised Jesus, declaring war against Urizen, the oppressive Jehovah in Blake's system.¹³ In *Europe: a Prophecy*, the mythical character Enitharmon is a revised version of Virgin Mary, who announces "that Womans love is Sin" (CPPB 62). With this figure, Blake

¹¹ Although Blake shares similar political views with radicals such as Thomas Paine, he opposes to their adherence to Deistic belief that defies biblical prophetic tradition with excessive employments of reason and the Newtonian mechanism (Robert 153, Essick 199).

¹² Except where indicated otherwise, all Blake's texts cited in this thesis are from David V. Erdman's edition of *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, abbreviated as CPPB.

¹³ That Orc serves as Blake's version of Jesus has been noted by critics such as A. D. Nuttall. Blake's poetic rendering of Orc/Jesus suggests the influence of Gnostic texts, which are probably available in late eighteenth-century London, as noted by Leslie Tannenbaum (15). Comparing Orc's line in *America*: "I am Orc, wreath'd round the accursed tree" with lines in "Introduction" of *Songs of Experience*: "The Holy Word, / That walk'd among the ancient tree" (CPPB 18) and Jesus's declaration in *Apocryphon of John*, a significant Gnostic text, that he is the one who brought Adam and Eve the forbidden fruit, we can discover that in Blake the "serpert-form'd" Orc identifies with Jesus rather than Satan. With this characterisation of Orc Blake revises Jesus as a mentor who taught the first-born human beings sexual delight, thus accomplishing his goal of sexual revision of Christianity.

discloses the physical and mental sterility caused by the Christian virtue of chastity. Hence, for Blake, the essence of Christianity lies not in the exclusion of sexual desire as a sin, but in the full embrace of sex without the restraints of reason and morality. Sex is not the division between the spiritual and the corporeal; through sexual love human beings can restore the lost “spiritual body” and unify the split mentalities to become the divine “Universal Man.” In other words, sexual desire is not only a form of positive energy but also a metaphor of religious and political liberation. However, as recent studies demonstrate, sexuality in Blake’s poetry and visual designs does not always correspond to a consistent ideology of liberation. There are contradictions and disruptions. The manifold aspects of sexual embodiment that might have been labelled “obscene” —bizarre sexual postures, twisted sexual mentalities, and perverse sexual orientations—emerge in his works. Should all these sexual images and motifs, including homosexuality, incest, rape, autoeroticism, transsexuality, and sadomasochism, be valued as necessary components of Blake’s “Poetic Genius” and the catalysts for religious and political liberation that he espouses?

Dealing with such a question, critical work concerning Blake’s “obscene” sides of sexuality have only emerged in the past twenty years. This critical tendency is reflected in Tristanne Connolly’s *William Blake and the Body* (2002) and two essay collections edited by Connolly and Helen P. Bruder: *Queer Blake* (2010) and *Sexy Blake* (2015). These studies share a critical tenet that Blake handles the problem of sexuality with a multi-layered configuration. That is, aside from his much-acknowledged defence of sexual desire, symbolically or literally, against repression, there are some subtle and disturbing aspects of sexuality in Blake, which are not so easily justified.¹⁴ Concurring to this tenet, my examination of Blake’s works centres on a critical formulation that Blake’s representation of obscenity presents an alternative trinity of art, sacredness, and sex in his system. Also, through

¹⁴ Blake’s inconsistent attitude toward sexuality, especially its sexist and misogynist aspects, has been identified in some earlier criticism, such as Susan Fox’s “The Female as Metaphor in William Blake’s Poetry,” Anne. K. Mellor’s *Romanticism and Gender*, and Alicia Ostriker’s “Desire Gratified and Ungratified.”

sexual violence and violent sex, Blake sets up a dialectic engagement with the contemporary aesthetics of the sublime and the ideal of masculinity. Furthermore, he presents a sacred experience—though still in a Christian frame—of self-annihilation, a motif dismissed as obscene in the eighteenth-century religious and moral ideologies. I seek to demonstrate how Blake employs images and motifs of obscenity to blur the conventional division between the holy and the secular, the pure and the unclean, self/subjectivity and other/objectivity. His heterogeneous aesthetics of obscenity implies the danger of championing sex as a positive force of liberation, pointing to an erotic/religious experience in which identity and subjectivity are threatened, twisted, inverted, and annihilated. In the two major poems of Blake that are analysed in this chapter—*Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and *Milton: a Poem*—the “obscene” Blake can be extensively explored.

To begin my examination of *Visions* and *Milton*, I will first revisit the poem “I saw a chapel all of gold” in which Mitchell identifies the issue of obscenity. Mitchell only cites the final two lines of the poem— “So I turned into a sty / And laid me down among the swine”—to accentuate the issue in question. In the brief discussion on Blake’s obscenity that follows, Mitchell does not further elaborate his reading of the poem. In fact, “I saw a chapel all of gold” contains some of the key elements of Blake’s representation of the concept of obscenity in the eighteenth century, formulated in the introduction. The ideas generated from a close reading of this poem can be developed and extended to Blake’s other major works. Generally, the poem “I saw a chapel all of gold” has not drawn much critical attention in Blake studies. In early critical discussions, Northrop Frye and David V. Erdman spend not a single page on the poem in their prominent works, *Fearful Symmetry* and *Prophet against Empire*. Harold Bloom, while providing commentary for Erdman’s edition of *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, does not remark on this poem. S. Foster Damon comments briefly on the poem, arguing that in it “a forced and unwanted act of sex (the Serpent) is a pollution of the sacrament of real love” (366). Apart from Damon’s interpretation, other comprehensive readings of the poem can only be found

in the two short essays by Robert F. Gleckner (1979) and Nicholas Warner (1983).

Gleckner's essay focuses on the influences of Blake's precursors—Spenser and Milton—on this poem. Drawing on Spenser's *The Ruines of Time* and *The Faerie Queene*, Blake depicts the chapel as “an image of false, idolatrous religion which, in its forbidding power and above all in its secrecy, deters even mistaken worship except from afar and without” (Gleckner 38-39). Underlining Blake's hidden references to Milton's *Samson Agonistes* and *Paradise Lost*, Gleckner reads the vomiting serpent as “the spirit of wrathful revolution against all forms of repression,” who is, however, “unilluminated by imaginative vision” (40). This uninspired form of revolution will lead to “the promulgation of new tyranny to replace the old” (40). Similarly, Warner regards the chapel as an institutionalised barrier that blocks people from the true spirit of Christianity. The serpent first appears as a rebellious hero who forces open the church. As soon as it is “upon the altar white,” where the Eucharist is set, the serpent degenerates into another form of priesthood, perverting Christ's spirit with defilement. The interpretations of Gleckner and Warner highlight the Romantic sentiment of hope and disillusionment for political revolution, which replaced monarchy with a new reign of terror. Reading “I saw a chapel all of gold” as an allegory of historical events conforms to the canonised interpretations of Blake that early critics, such as M. H. Abrams and Erdman, propose. However, the images and motifs in the poem that constitute this allegorisation have heterogeneous qualities that are overlooked in the standard reading. These qualities propel later critics such as Mitchell to consider Blake “filthy” and obscene. Combining later critical theories and a textual analysis of Blake's manuscript, my reading will provide an alternative interpretation of the serpent and the sacrament in this poem. By doing so, I will explicate Blake's obscenity and extend it to the examination of his other important works in later sections.

In *William Blake and the Body*, Tristanne Connolly turns to Mary Douglas's anthropological discussion of the discrimination between the sacred and the unclean in *Purity and Danger*. Connolly pays specific

attention to how transgressions of bodily boundary endanger the wholeness of religion and the stableness of society. She refers to Douglas's conclusion that holiness requires the preservation of classes and categories, which are epitomised by the human body as "a model which can stand for any bounded system" (Douglas 115). Its orifices, from which fluids are issued, are thus the "vulnerable points" that "traversed the boundary of the body" and other systems that the body signifies (Douglas 121). With Douglas's ideas, Connolly argues that "Blake's illuminated books are preoccupied with the orifices of the body," adding that in these works, the constantly "metamorphosing and splitting" body transgresses "the limits of the system" (Connolly, *William Blake and the Body* 4). In addition to Douglas, Connolly draws on Julia Kristeva's exploration of the semiotic and the symbolic, in order to see Blake's texts as an ever-changing process that disturbs and disrupts the fixity of meaning. She also refers to Kristeva's conceptualisation of the abject, which threatens the established identities that are constructed by the distinction between subject and object. Such "powers of horror" engendered by the abject, as Connolly observes, can be discovered in Blake's works, where he "faces the abject reality of the body" and "displays the horrors of physical existence in order to recognize them" (*William Blake and the Body* 8). The issue of obscenity in Blake certainly includes his refashioning of the human body, which is often eerily stretched, curled, distorted, and afflicted, as well as issuing bodily fluids that ought not to be present for their uncleanness. Accompanied by Douglas's and Kristeva's theories, Connolly provides anthropological and psychoanalytical angles to decipher Blake's often esoteric and unconventional poetics, especially in terms of sexual desire. However, while referring to Douglas's idea of bodily boundary and Kristeva's idea of the abject, Connolly does not elaborate how Blake's transgression of this boundary functions in his ideal of Christianity, which contains both sacred and erotic experiences. Hence, it is helpful to turn to Georges Bataille, a French thinker renowned for his *philosophie de l'excès et la transgression*. In Bataille's view, religious and erotic experiences are both constituted by exuberant energy and excessive consumption

(exemplified by sexual activities without the purpose of reproduction). This conceptualisation can be juxtaposed with “I saw a chapel all of gold,” in order to illuminate the obscene images that Blake situates in the Christian context.

To begin with, Bataille’s conceptualisation of eroticism distinguishes itself from common notions of the term in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and even in our time.¹⁵ In fact, Bataillean eroticism is much aligned with the idea of obscenity in the periods in question, particularly concerning the pagan rituals and the aesthetics of the sublime. Addressing the idea of religion as a division between the secular and the sacred, Bataille and Douglas share a same precursor, the French sociologist Émile Durkheim. In his *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim points out that

All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present a common quality: they presuppose a classification of things . . . into two classes, two opposite kinds, generally designated by two distinct terms effectively translated by the words profane and sacred. The division of the world into two comprehensive domains, one sacred, the other profane, is the hallmark of religious thought” (36).

Both under Durkheim’s influence, Bataille’s division of the profane and the sacred and Douglas’s division between the unclean and the sacred seem similar. There is, however, a subtle disparity between Bataille and Douglas, which makes Bataille a thinker more akin to Blake.¹⁶ For Douglas, sacredness is maintained by excluding the unclean objects and any

¹⁵ In the eighteenth century, the term “erotic” often indicates the indulgence in bodily appetite and sexual intercourses based on mutual affection. In modern usage, “erotica” suggests a more refined and artistic literary or visual representations of sex. In contrast, “pornography” is produced for mass consumption by featuring violence and exploitation of (for most of the time) women. The division between the erotic and the pornographic is actually irrelevant for Bataille. For him, eroticism—an act of drastic consumption of energy that parallels religious festivals of excessive expenditure—necessarily contains violence.

¹⁶ Blake is one of the seven authors (including Baudelaire and Sade) that Bataille discusses extensively in his *Literature and Evil*. Bataille raises Blake as a figure to prove that literature exists without being confined by a high moral ground, adding that literature’s value lies in its “sovereignty”: its heterogeneous qualities that cannot be assimilated into moral systems. Also, Bataille seems to recapitulate Blake’s ideal of “Poetic Genius” as “the true Man” from whom “all sects of Philosophy” and “The Religions of all Nations” (*All Religions are One*, *CPPB* 1) are derived, by proposing that “identification of man and poetry” can “turn religions into the work of man” (84). Also, Bataille’s argument that “all that is sacred is poetic and all that is poetic is sacred” (84) echoes Blake’s belief that through poetry “God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is” (*There is No Natural Religion*, *CPPB* 3). Hence, it can be speculated that Bataille’s ideas of religion and literature share the same root in human mentality, as well as the involvement of eroticism, are under certain influences of Blake.

behaviours that might produce them; in other words, the boundary must be protected in order to secure religious wholeness. In the last chapter of *Purity and Danger*, she does relate to an occasion in which “religions often sacralise the very unclean things which have been rejected with abhorrence” (196). In this exceptional situation, the unclean is present only to undergo a process of “pulverising, dissolving, and rotting” to annihilate its identity as an impure object. Douglas further argues that the danger posed by the unclean “represent[s] the powers inheriting in the cosmos” because it exposes “Those vulnerable margins” and threatens “to destroy good order” (199). The unclean that is brought into and destroyed in the sphere of sacredness is meant to demonstrate the capacity of religion to control natural powers. Bataille, however, approaches the division between the profane and the sacred from a different angle. The unclean that ought to be purged in Douglas’s view actually plays a significant role in Bataillean sacredness.

In *Theory of Religion*, Bataille proposes that the profane life of human beings is confined in the “world of things” (43).¹⁷ In this secular sphere, human activities are regulated according to the principle of work. In *Literature and Evil*, Bataille argues that the profane world is a “prosaic, unseductive world of work,” where people “see no poetry in exteriority” (84). The order of things and the principle of work are embodied in the human use of tools: “Insofar as tools are developed with their end in view, consciousness posits them as objects, as interruptions in the indistinct continuity” (*Theory of Religion* 27). The “indistinct continuity” is a key concept in Bataille’s thinking, denoting an “inner experience” of intimacy that human beings perceive in religious epiphany, artistic appreciation, and sexual ecstasy. That working through the usage of tools runs counter to the sacred, aesthetic, and sexual continuity resounds with Burke’s idea that a higher level of sublime feelings is generated by powerful animals that do not submit to human production. Though possessing enormous strength, an ox is not as sublime as other

¹⁷ In Bataille’s philosophy, the “things” are objects that human beings employ as tools and materials for (re)production. These objects have “no value in itself” and are “only in relation to an anticipated result” (*Theory of Religion* 28). For Bataille, therefore, the “things” signify all human activities of working that are inert, unimaginative, and unartistic.

beasts because it is “extremely serviceable” in human activities of work (*Enquiry* 65). That is, usefulness undermines aesthetic appreciation. This is the idea shared by Bataille, Burke, and Blake. In *The Accursed Share*, Bataille takes his argument further by approaching the profane world from the perspective of economics: the profane world is where human beings commit themselves to production and accumulation of resources. Accordingly, sexual intercourse that aims for reproduction is contained in the profane world.

As for the sacred world, the very opposite of the profane, Bataille postulates that:

man feels a kind of impotent horror in the sense of the sacred. This horror is ambiguous. Undoubtedly, what is sacred attracts and possesses an incomparable value, but at the same time it appears vertiginously dangerous for that clear and profane world where mankind situates its privileged domain.

(*Theory of Religion* 36)

In Bataillean sacredness consists of certain propensities of the Burkean sublime. Both experiences invoke the spectator’s fear by threatening his well-being in the secular world. Also, in contrast to Douglas’s division of the unclean and the sacred, Bataille regards the sacred as something that disturbs the social order, rather than maintaining it. It is disruption, not completeness, that empowers Bataillean sacredness. In other words, the sacred is not an experience of stability and health, but of ecstasy, oblivion, and violence. As Michael Richardson correctly observes, Bataillean sacredness “is revealed in bodily exhalations; extreme emotions; socially useless activity, all of which take the form of heterology that homogenous society would like to definitively expel” (45). Furthermore, from the perspective of economics, Bataille holds that the sacred signifies a moment that is free from “order of thing” and principle of work. It is a moment in which all the accumulated resources are subject to “the violence of an unconditional consumption” (*Theory of Religion* 49), and to the “desire to consume, to annihilate, to make a bonfire of our resources,” as “the fire and the ruin are what seem to us divine, sacred” (*Erotism* 185). By disregarding the purpose

of reproduction with exuberant consumption of bodily energy, eroticism aligns itself with the religious ritual of sacrifice. Sex and sacrifice embody the unique phenomenon of the sacred, as both activities “reveal the flesh”: “Sacrifice replaces the ordered life of the animal with a blind convulsion of its organs. So also with the erotic convulsion; it gives free rein to extravagant organs whose blind activity goes on beyond the considered will of the lovers” (*Erotism* 92).

Aligning sex with religious sacrifice as an act of expenditure regardless of reproductive purpose, Bataille corresponds to Blake’s notion of erotic pleasure that “the youth shut up from / The lustful joy. shall forget to generate” in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (7.5-6 *CPPB* 50). It can also be juxtaposed with the cult of Bacchus/Dionysus in the eighteenth-century religious treatises and Nietzsche’s idea of Dionysian intoxication. In such a ritual, sex and violence are combined to the extent of mental blindness that transcends consciousness. It also presents the disclosure of the human body and even the unseen and “obscene” interior of the body, as what Bacchus/Dionysus’s maenads do to Orpheus in Greek mythology. With the simulation of death, the revelation of convulsive bodies, overflowing blood, and interior organs, the sacred ritual brings forth a sensation of *plethora*, the abundance and effusion of life in an excessive manner, resonating with Blake’s passionate declaration against restraints in *There is No Natural Religion* “More! More! is the cry of a mistaken soul, less than All cannot satisfy Man” (*CPPB* 2) and “Exuberance is Beauty” in the Proverbs of Hell (*CPPB* 38). It also forms an extreme spectacle of violence resembling Burke’s sublime description of Damien’s execution that should be unpresentable, and is therefore, obscene. Erotic/sacred experience, as Bataille concludes, “is the feeling of something bursting, of the violence accompanying an explosion” (*Erotism* 93). Thus, what is dismissed in Douglas’s holiness as disrupting elements are crucial in Bataillean sacredness. Concerned with the dynamic between bodily sex and religion, the theories of Douglas and Bataille provide a novel angle to understand the issue of obscenity in Blake’s works, in which he constantly eroticises

Christian images and motifs. With this approach, the following section will provide an analysis of the defilement in “I saw a chapel all of gold.”

The poem opens with the speaker’s witness of a boundary that is strictly drawn between two spheres: within the chapel and without the chapel. The division is absolute and the two domains are mutually exclusive. It reflects what Douglas maintains in *Purity and Danger* that “Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong” and “holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused” (53). The boundary between the closed chapel of gold and those “weeping mourning worshipping” outside can be seen as the division between the sacred and the profane worlds constructed by prohibition—the “Thou shalt not” inscription on the chapel’s door in “The Garden of Love.” It also represents the traditional dichotomy between spirit and body, the transcendental and the material. From the second stanza, Blake initiates the transgression of this boundary, which is embodied by the image of a serpent that rises between “The white pillars of the door.”

For Blake, the act of gazing implies a process of identification, as he reiterates the line “they became what they beheld” (*CPPB* 178) to describe the murder of Albion and the violent disintegration of the Universal Man in Chapter 2 of *Jerusalem*. The speaker, who sees the violent spectacle of forcing and tearing the golden hinges, unconsciously identifies with the serpent. This point is relevant in determining the speaker’s attitude and action in the last stanza. Following the serpent into the chapel, the speaker sees “the pavement sweet,” and “pearls & rubies bright.” Blake discloses the very interior of the seemingly sacred world, which is decorated with material luxuries. Moreover, the bread and the wine on the white altar are the materialisation of Jesus’s spirit of self-sacrifice. Here the dichotomy of the spiritual and the material is dissolved. In the following climax of defilement, the vomiting serpent, as a phallic image, penetrates through the vulva-like white pillars and ejaculates its semen-poison on the spiritual body/bodily spirit of Jesus, in order to perform what Damon calls “a forced and unwanted act of sex” (366). Recalling James Adair’s 1775 treatise, in which the purity of

American Indian rites contrasts with the “impure and obscene religious ceremonies of the ancient heathens,” we can observe that the serpent’s violation of the sacrament embodies the eighteenth-century notion of religious obscenity by meddling the sexual/unclean with the sacred. The holiness in Douglas’s definition is breached by breaking the classes. In this moment, Blake’s representation of the scene is more akin to Bataille’s sacredness, where religious and erotic experiences are synthesised. In this scene, the bread and the wine do not represent the sacred sphere that is defiled by the serpent. Instead, the entire action of the serpent vomiting its poison upon the bread and the wine is essentially a sacred experience. Such a critical position not only gains support from Bataille’s theorisation of the sacred. A synoptic reading that involves Blake’s other poems can also provide a further explication.

It is crucial, therefore, to determine Blake’s evaluation of the serpent’s action and the sacrament in the chapel. According to Warner, the serpent represents a revolutionary hero who becomes a tyrant himself and violates the sacrament after he overthrows the church. Such a reading, however, avails little in regard of the enigmatic last two lines (“So I turn’d into a sty / And laid me down among the swine”), which Mitchell cites to support his argument of Blake’s obscenity. To obtain a valid reading of the poem and elicit Blake’s poetic design of obscenity that can be explored in his other major works, I first relocate the poem into its textual context. “I saw a chapel all of gold” is found in Blake’s Notebook, which is referred to as “The Rossetti Manuscript.”¹⁸ The poem “I saw a chapel all of gold” was written on a page among other five poems, three of which are included in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*: “My Pretty Rose Tree,” “The Clod and Pebble,” and “The Garden of Love.” The page is divided into two columns: “I saw a chapel all of gold” is placed at the bottom of the right column, beneath “I laid me down upon a bank” and the draft of “The Garden of Love.” The three poems in the left column present a unified theme: love, or more specifically,

¹⁸ Dante Gabriel Rossetti purchased it from William Palmer (brother of Samuel Palmer, one of Blake’s close friends) in 1847 and produced his own transcript of it. See Erdman’s introduction to *The Notebook of William Blake*.

the mechanism of desire. In the right column, where “I saw a chapel all of gold” belongs, “I laid me down upon a bank” shares the same theme with “The Garden of Love,” both attacking the virtue of chastity and ascetic tradition of Christianity. Accordingly, it is highly possible that the image of serpent and the motif of sacrilege in “I saw a chapel all of gold” serve the same purpose as the other two poems in the right column.

Thus, the two chapels in “The Garden of Love” and “I saw a chapel all of gold” both represent the religious repression of sexual desire. In the former, the speaker escapes from the oppressive chapel, but only to find that the garden of love is already intruded by “graves” and “tomb-stones” (*CPPB* 26). In the latter, the speaker does not escape, but follows the serpent that intrudes the very centre of prohibition by trespassing the religious boundary. As a symbol of female sexuality and fertility of nurturing function, the garden of love that is violated by tomb-stones can be read as “the punishment of the speaker’s sexual desire for his mother” (George 79)—a punishment implemented by the patriarchal/paternal chapel. In such a context, the serpent and the speaker in “I saw a chapel all of gold” breaking into the chapel all of gold can be interpreted as a counterattack on the oppressive religious institution.

The sacrament defiled by the serpent’s vomited poison, according to Warner, is something should be “available to the Weeping, mourning, worshipping people outside” (24). That is, Warner sees the bread and the wine on the altar white as the symbol of true Christianity that Blake promotes. But are the bread and wine in this poem truly so? The question about Blake’s real attitude toward the Eucharist emerges. Biographically, we might trace the works of Joseph Priestley, a renowned religious dissent whose works were published by Joseph Johnson, one of Blake’s employers in his career as an engraver. In his *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, Priestley denounces the rite because it “opened a door to endless superstition,” because common objects are elevated to possess “a real virtue,” and consequently Christians might “put these merely external rites in the place of moral virtue” (7). As Jon Mee points out, many of Blake’s works share

Priestley's political and religious ideas, including the support of the American and French Revolutions and the idea against soul-body dualism ("Blake's Politics in History" 137).¹⁹ In light of this, it is highly possible that Blake shares with Priestley a negative view of the ritual. Examining Blake's references to the Eucharist in other poems, we can elicit two different views of this ritual. For example, in the Notebook, there is a poem which starts with the line "My Spectre around me night & day" and ends with this stanza:

& Throughout all Eternity
I forgive you you forgive me
As our dear Redeemer said
This the Wine & this the Bread.
(CPPB 477)

This poem opens with the affliction caused by the erroneous separation of the speaker's masculine aspect "Spectre" that "Like a Wild beast guards my way" and his feminine aspect "Emanation," which "Weeps incessantly for my Sin." The separation results in "Pride & scorn" and "jealousies & fear," until the speaker renounces it and "root up the infernal grove / Then shall we return & see / The worlds of happy Eternity." In the context of this poem, the wine and the bread are not material objects set in a ritual as in "I saw a chapel all of gold." They represent the realisation of Christ's spirit of forgiveness and sacrifice free from the confinement of the "chapel." Furthermore, the capitalised "Wine" and "Bread" are crucial, as capitalisation is one of the most frequent methods used by Blake's to highlight images of significant symbolic meanings. The capitalisation of wine and bread also appears in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, in which the direct identification with Jesus is established: "He is the Bread & the Wine he is the Water of Life" (CPPB 561). In another poem "The Mental Traveller," on the contrary, the lower-case "bread & wine" are presented as beguiling material enjoyments of "wayward love" (CPPB 484) in a vicious cycle of struggles between the young and the old. Hence, there is an obvious disparity in Blake's presentations of the images of wine and bread in his works. In "My

¹⁹ For the denial of body-soul dichotomy shared by Blake and Priestley, also see Morton D. Paley's discussion in *Energy and the Imagination: A Study of the Development of Blake's Thought*, p. 8-10.

Spectre around me night & day” and *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, the images with capitalised letters exemplify the reunion of split human mentalities as a path to restore true Christian belief. On the contrary, the lower-case “bread and wine” in “The Mental Traveller” and “I saw a chapel all of gold” are negative objects that ensnare human beings and is falsely sanctified in a ritual of institutionalised religion. Thus, it is possible to dismiss Damon’s and Warner’s conclusion that the Eucharist in “I saw a chapel all of gold” represents “the sacrament of real love” or something should be “available to the ‘Weeping, mourning, worshipping’ people outside.” If the bread and the wine in the poem represent false objectification of Christ’s spirit, the critical question will be: what is the point to defile the already-fallen things with vomited poison? As I have argued, for Blake, the bread and the wine do not represent the Christian sacredness defiled by the serpent. Rather, the entire scene of defilement in the last stanza is the representation of the sacred.

In Douglas’s formulation, most religions are constituted by laws and taboos and holiness is based on the strict principle of classification and separation between the sacred and the profane, the pure and the unclean. The serpent’s action in the chapel, following its intrusion into the chapel, is another transgression of the boundary. Blake’s emphasis on the serpent’s “slimy length” intensifies a sense of viscosity. Both Douglas and Kristeva discuss this unstable and dangerous state. Viscosity, or sliminess, according to Douglas, is “a half way between solid and liquid” and “a cross section in a process of change” that “attacks the boundary between myself and it” (47). Unlike touching water, by which the subject is able to secure his own solid subjectivity, the sensation of touching something slimy generates a sense of ambiguity, which disturbs classification and blurs the line of separation. In Kristeva’s introduction to the abject, the unstable state of sliminess is exemplified by the skin on the surface of milk that triggers a strong reaction of repugnance. Sliminess, for Kristeva, reminds a human subject of his/her still-tangling bound with “the mother,” “the feminine,” a bound that has to be

severed in order to establish subjectivity and social identity (3).²⁰ In other words, the serpent's sliminess further disturbs the religious wholeness in the patriarchal chapel with a power of the feminine that threatens subjectivity and selfhood.

As Damon maintains, the defilement is a symbolic rape, "a forced and unwanted act of sex" (366). Blake seems to present a negative portrayal of male sexuality, as the word "poison" implies the potentially destructive nature in sex. The action of "vomiting his poison out" is another transgression of boundary concerning the body. Blake's direct presentation of ejected bodily fluid, which resembles other "abjected" objects such as saliva, feces, urine, and menstrual blood, bring what are unpresentable back into display. "Vomiting his poison out" is the blurring of the borderline between the visible exterior body and the concealed interior body. The bodily fluid that is violently thrown out from the body unto the sacrament destabilises the division between the sacred and the profane.²¹ However, as I have showed in the tracing of the Eucharist in Blake's other poems, the sacrament here is not something truly sacred, but only profane objects that are already degenerative.

Blake's choice of the word "vomit," rather than the more frequent "issue" or "issue forth," indicates a propensity of pathology and unstableness that echoes the serpent's sliminess.²² By using the word "vomiting," Blake enhance the "abject" quality of the issued fluid, the serpent's poison. "Poison" is a word that Blake often chooses to describe repressed negative emotions,

²⁰ Blake predates such a psychoanalytic interpretation of familial relationship Sigmund Freud later elaborates. That is, a male must withdraw his infant love for his mother and project it to another woman. Only by doing so can he complete a positive Oedipus process and construct his subjectivity in society. In "To Tirzah" in the *Songs of Experience*, the speaker repeats Jesus's famous dismissal of his mother, who "Didst bind my Nostrils Eyes & Ears" and "close my Tongue in senseless clay," by saying relentlessly: "Then what have I to do with thee?" (CPPB 30). The poem suggests that only by severing the earthly bond with the mother can Jesus establish his subjectivity as the saviour for the entire humanity. It is difficult to determine Blake's attitude toward the archetype of mother in Christianity though, which usually represents corporeality and mortality.

²¹ It is also an inversion of what Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew: "Take, eat; this is my body . . . Drink ye all of it; For it is my blood" (Mat 26: 26).

²² According to *A Concordance to the Writings of William Blake* edited by Erdman, Blake uses the word "issue" and its variants for thirty-five times, while "vomit" is used only for three times.

such as anger and jealousy in “The Poison Tree” of the *Songs of Experience* and *Visions of the Daughter of Albion*: “poison from the desert wilds, from the eyes of the envier” (4.11 *CPPB* 48). The serpent throws out his poison—the abject material with the connotation of destructive human mentality—in a convulsive manner that approximates to sexual ecstasy. Such an inclusion of violence and eroticism into religious ritual is what Bataille deems the essence of the sacred. In this scene, Blake presents a convulsive, “forcd & forcd & forcd,” ejaculation of abject fluid, which ought to be contained inside the body, upon religious objects. With this image, Blake insinuates the mutually inclusive ideas of the sacred and the erotic. As Bataille also observes, both sex and religious sacrifice “reveal the flesh” and the interior of the body: “Sacrifice replaces the ordered life of the animal with a blind convulsion of its organs. So also with the erotic convulsion; it gives free rein to extravagant organs whose blind activity goes on beyond the considered will of the lovers” (*Erotism* 92). Moreover, Bataille proposes that the transgression of prohibitions illumines sexual acts “with a religious glow” (*The Tears of Eros* 66). From this perspective, Blake’s violation of the Eucharist also underlines the significance of violently transgressing bodily boundary in order to achieve an essential sacred/erotic experience.

Witnessing this ritual spectacle, the speaker “turnd into a sty / And laid me down among the swine.” This action is commonly interpreted as a disgusted reaction to the defilement—the pollution of the bread and the wine. However, if the speaker’s reaction is of sheer disgust and repugnance, why does he take the specific action of lying down among the swine, instead of simply showing his opposition to or attempting to stop the serpent’s defilement? The speaker’s final action—lying down among the swine—is an action of bestiality and dehumanisation, which are considered obscene in eighteenth-century religious treatises on heathen cults especially Dionysus’s orgiastic ritual. Also, one of the definitions of “sty” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is an “abode of bestial lust, or of moral pollution generally” (“sty, n3”). “Sty” in such a meaning has been adopted by writers, including Shakespeare, Milton, and Burke, to describe the indulgence in excessive

sensual pleasure. Blake's word choice of "sty" not only serves the rhyming, but also reflects this specific metaphorical usage. The speaker forsakes his identity as a human being, positioning himself with animals in "a sty," a realm of obscene sexuality. If the speaker is abhorred by the serpent's defilement, it will be difficult to explicate his action in the last two lines. In other words, the speaker does not turn away because he is disgusted or disillusioned by the serpent's action. On the contrary, the causal conjunction "So" suggests that he is "propelled" by the serpent's defilement of the religious objects, which "enlightens" the speaker that the access into sacredness requires the transgression of boundaries.²³ He turns to a sty and lie down with the swine in an attempt to emulate the transgression, in order to enter the sphere of the sacred.

A crossing from the profane world to the sacred world is not impossible. But it requires a transformation: a becoming that entails abandoning a subject's previous identity. According to Durkheim, this is the process of a "true metamorphosis," when the previous identity "ceases to exist and is instantaneously replaced by another" and is eventually "reborn in a new form" (39). What Blake presents in the last stanza, is therefore the speaker's drastic alteration of his subjectivity by transgressing the boundary between men and beasts and by forsaking his self as a human being. This action of self-annihilation is inspired by the serpent's alternative ritual of defilement: the transgression of bodily boundary and the borderline between the sacred and the erotic. The entire "I saw a chapel all of gold" is a series of transgressions of boundaries and prohibition, which develop into a climax of self-annihilation in the final stanza, signifying the access to sacredness through self-shattering eroticism.

From the above analysis of "I saw a chapel all of gold," we can elicit an understanding of Blake's unconventional view of religious sacredness, whose inclusion of highly heterogeneous aspects of sexuality—uncleanness, violence, excrement, and dehumanisation—forms a unique aesthetic

²³ Gleckner is therefore partially right by arguing that "[r]ather than 'disgust' or 'disillusionment,' the speaker experiences a revelation, an enlightenment" (46).

phenomenon. For Blake, if there is a true Christian belief that human beings should be in pursuit of, it must involve sexual desires of even the most “obscene” kinds, which run counter to the eighteenth-century moral sensitivity. For Blake, “Poetic Genius” is “Universal Man,” from which religious belief is derived (*All Religions are One*, CPPB 3); it is the “spiritual body” and “Human form divine” walking “Amidst the lustful fires” (*America*, CPPB 54) that Blake aspires to. Such a trinity of art, sacredness, and eroticism predates Bataille’s idea of “religious eroticism” —*l’erotisme sacré*— in which human beings “take God’s place, to become God oneself” (Richardson 32).²⁴ By approaching the textual context of the poem and involving the theorisations of eroticism, uncleanness, the abject, and sacredness by Durkheim, Douglas, Kristeva, and Bataille, this section has offered a more refined set of interpretations than Mitchell’s sensational and oversimplified comments on Blake’s obscenity that he “was filthy with work and visionary conviction” and “could wipe his ass on the poem of a competitor and compare the shadows in Ruben’s paintings to excrement” (414). Blake’s obscenity, as demonstrated in “I saw a chapel all of gold,” is not only a deliberate degradation of institutionalised Christianity. It is also a subtle and complex exploration of the essence of religion based on scared/erotic experience. As my reading of this poem in the Notebook has settled a critical basis for Blake’s obscenity, I will move forward to examine Blake’s major works that is subject to the issue. The following sections will focus on *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and *Milton: a Poem*. By paying specific attention to the motifs of autoeroticism and transsexuality, I will further explicate the “obscene” erotic subject in Blake’s poetry.

²⁴ The concept of “inner experience,” which contains religious sacredness and sexual ecstasy, is significant in Bataille’s philosophy. The book with the same title of the concept *Inner Experience* written in 1943 is one of the three books included in a volume that Bataille names *La Somme athéologique*. As Leslie Anne Boldt points out, Bataille devises such a title to contrast it with Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* because “*Inner Experience* is a treatise which resonates with the absence of God” (ix). It is interesting to juxtapose Blake’s concept of “human form divine” and “God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is” with Bataille’s idea that in the sacred experience the human subject is freed from his/her profane identity and becomes a god him/herself, because in fact there is no God.

DEATH, VIOLENCE, AND AUTUEROICISM
IN VISIONS OF THE DAUGHTERS OF ALBION

Written and engraved in 1793, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* has generated some of the fiercest debates in Blake studies. Oothoon—"the soft soul of America" (1.3)—is raped by Bromion during the journey to her lover, Theotormon. After the assault, Theotormon chains "the adulterate pair / Bound back to back" (2.4-5) and immerses himself in jealousy and despair.²⁵ A number of passages continuously incite critical disputes about sexuality in Blake's works: Bromion's presumptuous boast about his possession of Oothoon as a property and his condemnation of the rape victim as a harlot, Oothoon's self-punishment in a desperate attempt to regain Theotormon's love, and her aspiration to capture "girls of mild silver" for her lover's promiscuous pleasure. The poem is not only an allegorical account of plantation slavery, but also a psychological observation of the consequences of rape. These consequences make a great impact on the male violator, the female victim, and the victim's male partner.

Early criticism of *Visions* includes Erdman's historical interpretation in *Prophet against Empire* and Frye's archetypal study in *Fearful Symmetry*. Erdman's study, as Jon Mee puts it, "offered the first thoroughgoing account of Blake's deep involvement with his own time" (*Dangerous Enthusiasm* 1), and the later historical criticism is more or less under his influence. Erdman's reading of *Visions* generally concerns Blake's allusions to the contemporary abolitionist movements; in the interrelationship between Oothoon, Theotormon, and Bromion, he discerns the institution of plantation slavery and the English response to it. From this perspective, Bromion represents contemporary slave owners, who usually raped and impregnated slaves to enhance their commodity value, as Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant note (*BPD* 59). Also, the character alludes to the Antijacobin politicians such as Burke and Lord Abingdon, who disapproved the abolition bill in Parliament. Theotormon, the powerless husband of the violated Oothoon,

²⁵ From Erdman's edition (abbreviated as *CPPB*), the text of *Visions* is indicated by plate and line numbers in parenthesis.

stands for the weak-minded English abolitionists, who were constantly frustrated by the domestic conservatism. Within this historical scope, the issue of Oothoon's sexuality and her mental state as a rape victim are overlooked. Her subsequent imagined self-punishment (of calling Theotormon's eagle to rent her breast) and her vision of Theotormon's promiscuous sex with multiple women are sublimated as "sparks of Promethean fire or winged thoughts calculated to widen his [Theotormon] brow" (Erdman 241).

Different from Erdman's approach, Frye regards *Visions* as a continuation of *The Book of Thel*. The poem, as he proposes, "illustrates the failure to unite the state of experience with that of innocence" (*Fearful Symmetry* 238). This failure is actualised in marriage system that is regulated by morality and religion. In this limited state such as the union between Theotormon and Oothoon, innocent love "so easily turns into a jealous possessiveness rationalized by a priggish morality" (241). In Frye's archetypal analysis, the triangular relationship between the three characters in *Visions* is a variant of the adulterous love between Lancelot and Guinevere and their conflict with King Arthur. This pattern, as Frye argues, is recapitulated later in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. While recognising Oothoon as "a fully developed imagination," Frye does not elaborate how Oothoon achieves this state through her trial in terms of sexuality. Damon echoes Frye's point that Oothoon "denounces the loveless marriage...also the selfish and envious husband" and "reaches the stage of spiritual rebellion" (438). For him, the heroine's final vision of promiscuity is "the sanctity of the individual" and "the freedom of true love" (438). We can perceive that early critics tend to sublimate Blake's rendering of sexuality in *Visions*. They generally focus on the poem's reflection of historical events and its resonance with other literary archetypes and patterns. The possible images and motifs of obscenity in this poem, such as masturbation, masochism, and promiscuity, and Blake's complicated treatments of them, are left unnoticed or deliberately shunned in earlier critical work.

Later critics have cast doubts upon Frye's assertion that Blake's corpus

“not only belongs to a unified scheme but is in accord with a permanent structure of ideas” (*Fearful Symmetry* 14). Such doubts are often related to the issue of sexuality. Alicia Ostriker identifies four different Blakes of different attitudes toward sexuality: the Blake as an advocate of sexual desire against religious and moral repression, the Blake “who depicts sexual life as a complex web of gender complementarities and interdependencies,” the Blake who deems sex a dangerous trap of seduction and degeneration, and the sexist and misogynist Blake who sees “female principle as subordinate to the male” (560). Although Ostriker argues against Frye’s unilateral reading by showing Blake’s inconsistency, her discussion of *Visions* still conforms to the early critics’ interpretations. That is, she takes *Visions* as an example of the first Blake—the defender of free love—arguing that Oothoon “defines and defends her sexuality,” “attacks patriarchal ideology,” and “outflanks everyone in her poem for intellectuality and spirituality” (564). Ostriker’s reading still shows the tendency to sublimate sexuality in Blake’s works—a tendency that is pervasive in early critical discussions by Erdman, Frye and Damon.

Anne K. Mellor’s essay “Sex, Violence, and Slavery: Blake and Wollstonecraft” re-examines Blake’s attitude toward contemporary slavery institution. In the essay, she elicits the poet’s controversial perception of gender equality proposed in Wollstonecraft’s works. Mellor first discusses John Gabriel Stedman’s *The Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, whose relation to *Visions* has been recognised by Erdman and David Bindman. Mellor refutes the two scholars’ notion that Stedman was a downright advocate of the abolition as he claims in *The Narrative*. She then doubts Blake’s (as one of the illustrators of *The Narrative*) attitude toward plantation slavery and female subjugation to men. Stedman’s condescending sympathy for the black slaves insinuates his white and Christian superiority. Similarly, Blake in *Visions* assimilates female liberation of sexual intuition into the gratification of male desire. For Mellor, Oothoon’s problematic self-punishment and her vision of promiscuous enjoyment for Theotormon are representations “condoning the continuation of female slavery under a benevolent master” (“Sex, Violence, and Slavery”

369). These representations identify “the female as a procurer of love and sexual gratification” that is exclusive for men (369). Mellor’s analysis of *Visions* continues her critical position in her earlier *Romanticism and Gender*. In this monograph, she maintains that even though Blake advocates sexual liberation for both men and women, he “shared his culture’s denigration of the feminine gender” and “consistently portrayed the female—as a poetic metaphor, as a set of human activities, and as a visual image—as secondary to the male” (*Romanticism and Gender* 22). Mellor exposes the negative aspects of Blake’s sexual ideology. Early critics tend to neglect this negativity, as they often uncritically incorporate sexual desire into Blake’s unified poetic/mythical system and neutralise it as a part of his symbolism of political and religious liberations. Nevertheless, even though Mellor has pointed out the crucial deficit about sexuality in early Blake studies, the obscene images and motifs in *Visions* remain marginalised and unaccounted for.

Diana Hume George’s 1980 *Blake and Freud* is perhaps the first study that regards sexuality as a primary issue in *Visions*. Referring to Freud’s theorisation of infantile sexuality and the familial/cultural interferences, George argues that both Freud and Blake are aware of the conflict between human sexual instinct and the establishment of social norms. This conflict results in the tragic marriage of Theotomon and Oothoon in *Visions*—a relationship afflicted by “[j]ealousy and aggression in the male, resentment and frigidity in the female” (George 131). She then compares the different approaches that Blake and Freud take to address the situation in which sexual desire encounters social and cultural configurations. For Freud, sexual drives must undergo proper sublimation to prevent them from threatening social stability. Unlike the psychoanalyst, Blake does not consider sex “antagonistic to the intellect” (George 144). Furthermore, he values sex as a key to “build genuinely human cities and create fully realized relationships” (144). George’s analysis of *Visions* pays specific attention to Blake’s treatments of sexual activities that are excluded from normal heterosexual and phallic-centred mechanism, such as masturbation and fetishism that focus on bodily parts other than reproductive organs. Her

critical approach with Freud's psychoanalytical theories offers a way to explore heterogeneous forms of sexual desire that is often concealed in the unconscious.

In more recent studies of *Visions*, the two articles by Bethan Stevens and Caroline Jackson-Houlston collected in *Queer Blake* (2010) tackle the unconventional sexual orientations in this poem. Focusing on Theotormon's status as a victim, Stevens proposes that the Daughters of Albion are the spectators of a potential male-on-male rape. Blake's treatment of the wronged husband "transforms the conventional image of imperialism from a tired trope of heterosexual conquest, to a queer and challenging vision of omnisexual abuse" (Stevens 150). As Stevens concludes, the violation of a man by another man cannot be articulated in the abolition literature at the time, and it is the very reason of Theotormon's impotence and inarticulateness in the entire incident. Jackson-Houlston focuses first on Oothoon's plucking of the Marygold-nymph at the beginning of the poem. She argues that the episode represents "a consensual and co-sensual enjoyment of sexuality between two female figures" (Jackson-Houlston 154). The lesbian love, in her view, embodies Blake's dismissal of male aggressiveness in conventional heterosexual intercourse and his embrace of positive "forms of female sexuality that do not involve penile penetration" (161). Both Stevens and Jackson-Houlston approach the poem by adopting "queering" – an analytical method with which "the paradigms of heteronormativity are resisted/undermined" (Mills 2). Indeed, this "queering" critical position sheds light on the unexplored aspects of sexuality in *Visions*, demonstrating that Blake is open to sexual possibilities that were excluded by social norms and marital institution.

Though the queer reading of *Visions* unveils certain "abnormal" sexualities in Blake's time, it still conforms to Richard Sha's viewpoint that Romantic sexual perversions aesthetically envision an ideal erotic love based on mutual affection and pleasure. My examination of *Visions* contrasts with this positive evaluation of sex, as well as the sublimation in the earlier critical

work. Focusing on the more “negative” aspects of sexuality,²⁶ I would argue that in *Visions*, Blake’s treatment of the relationship between Oothoon, Bromion, and Theotormon presents both textually and visually the aesthetics of violence. This heterogeneous aesthetics reflects the concept of obscenity in the eighteenth century as an alternative sacred/erotic experience of self-annihilation.²⁷ Under the cover of more justifiable symbolism of sex that calls for liberation, Blake introduces his fascination with the obscene. To achieve this Blake first draws upon Erasmus Darwin’s scientific poetics of plants to design Oothoon’s plucking of the Marygold as a potentially violent sexual experience that approximates to death. Second, with the possible influences from Samuel-Auguste Tissot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, he presents Theotormon’s and Oothoon’s autoerotic fantasy after the rape that disintegrates their identities and generates self-shattering masochist pleasure. All these representations of erotic subjects attest to the conceptualisation of obscenity as a unique aesthetic phenomenon of self-annihilation.²⁸

²⁶ My position here is partly inspired by Bataille’s idea that poetry and eroticism are both the negative energy in human mentality. Bataille once claims, “It seems to me true poetry was reached only by hatred. Poetry had no powerful meaning except in the violence of revolt” (*The Impossible* 10). Furthermore, Bataille proposes that poetry, eroticism, and religion all share the same quality: a “relentless pursuit of the self-dissolving negative experience of ecstasy” (Biles and Brintnall 1).

²⁷ Marcus Wood also pays attention to the violent artistic representations in *Visions*. In *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography*, he discusses Stedman’s *The Narrative* and Blake’s illustrations of it and argues that “late eighteenth-century English culture was producing mainstream publications depicting the black body in pornographic ways” (93). And the images of black slaves’ tortured bodies are reproduced in *Visions* in the similar pornographic manner.

²⁸ In Blake’s system, the Self or Selfhood denotes the Satanic/Urizenic facet of human psyche—an evil tendency to abstract and rationalize the outer world perceived by senses and an alienated masculine persona of the Spectre—that falls into self-righteousness, jealousy, and tyranny on the Moral Laws and the Ten Commandments. The aggrandisement of the Selfhood obstructs poetic imagination and disintegrates the “Universal Man,” creating a fallen world of oppression. Self-annihilation, therefore, is a key process that human beings have to undergo in order to restore the primary divinity, to “regain the Paradise,” a state that reintegrates both the masculine and the feminine—“sexless in the sense that it is undivided” (Tayler 250). In *Milton*, Milton, as the greatest precursor of Blake, recognizes his Selfhood as Satan/Urizen and strives to annihilate it with a gesture of breaking his own name on the title page and by descending to “Eternal Death” to reconcile with his feminine aspect, “his Sixfold Emanation scatter’d thro’ the deep / In torment” (2.19-20, *CPPB* 96). In *Jerusalem*, Jesus’s sacrifice epitomizes the concept of self-annihilation; it is a “redemption through death and the annihilation of the righteous selfhood” (McGann, “The Aim of Blake’s Prophecies” 10) and “a voluntary death of the old man and a waking of the new” (18). In short, the process of Blakean self-annihilation is a synthesis of religious epiphany, poetic inspiration, and a

At the beginning of *Visions*, the motto on the title page declares: “The Eye sees more than the Heart knows” (CPPB 45). At first glance, this line reminds us of Blake’s re-evaluation of body-soul dualism in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in which body, or the material world, “is a portion of Soul discerned by the five Senses” (CPPB 34). The superiority of the Eye over the Heart indicates Blake’s emphasis on bodily sensuality, with which human beings can aspire to a higher level of imagination and create poetic and artistic visions. As Johnson and Grant point out, in Blake “the source of spiritual power and authority is the human imagination, nourished by the delights of the senses but unconfined by the world they perceive” (BPD 3). Eroticism – the sexual delight unrestrained by reproductive obligation and religious abstinence – is also based on bodily sensations. In *Europe: a Prophecy*, Blake illustrates the five senses as the “Five windows” that “light the cavern’d Man”: a sense to see, a sense to smell, a sense to hear, a sense to taste, and finally a sense to touch. With the five senses, a human being can relish erotic ecstasy, in which “himself pass out what time he please, but he will not; / For stolen joys are sweet, & bread eaten in secret pleasant” (iii.4-5 CPPB 60). Recapitulating the same theme, the motto of *Visions* “clearly establishes the primacy of vision over the limited awareness of the natural heart” according to Harold Bloom’s note (CPPB 900). It foretells the sexual struggles of Oothoon and Theotormon torn between bodily pleasure and spiritual/moral constraints in their hearts. As the plot of *Visions* unfolds, Oothoon’s and Theotormon’s attempt to free themselves from such a dichotomy with a series of problematic actions of obscenity—masochist soliciting, autoerotic fantasy, and voyeuristic promiscuity. Blake’s poetic and

harmonious reunion between the two sexes.

However, in Blake’s representation of the erotic interactions between men and women, both textual and visual, the concept of self-annihilation does not always announce a unilaterally positive tenet of selfless sacrifice “that is echoed in every kindness any man performs for another” (Doskow 164). As this chapter will show, aside from being a central factor of Blake’s revisionist Christian system of the “human form divine,” self-annihilation is a major source of eroticism in Blake’s portrayal of unconventional sexual orientations. Self-annihilation as an erotic phenomenon is empowered by the violent alteration of human subjectivity and dissolution of pre-existing identity, social and biological. Blake’s designs of Oothoon and Theotormon in *Visions* exemplify this alternative aspect of self-annihilation.

visual depictions of these motifs insinuate a unique form of sexual pleasure that combines bodily sensations and psychological manipulations.

At the beginning of the poem, Oothoon's subjectivity is already problematic even before she is raped by Bromion. In the Argument, Oothoon confesses her faltering self-perception of love. Though she loves Theotormon and "was not ashamed," a radical declaration in a cultural milieu that often prohibited female expression of sexual desire (Bruder 74). Even though she courageously articulates her love for Theotormon, she trembles in "virgin fears" and conceals herself "in Leutha's vale" (iii.2-4). Oothoon's nameless "virgin fear" soon becomes "woe," in which she wanders "Along the vales of Leutha seeking flowers to comfort her" (1.3-4).²⁹ Oothoon's "woe," corresponding to Blake's frequent usage of the word in other poems such as "When early morn walks forth in sober grey" in *Poetical Sketches* and "The Angel" in the *Songs of Experience*, connotes the self-repression of sexual desire and the consequent emotions of negativity. The "woe" thus represents the virgin heroine's sexual frustration—her "virgin fears"—which is due to her lover Theotormon's impotence and his conservative attitude toward sex in marriage, deriving from the Christian ideology that even in marriage, the solitary purpose of sex is to procreate, not to seek pleasure—a condition aptly indicated in Lady Sarah Cowper's eighteenth-century diary, in which she "reckon [her] Self a Mirror of Chastity, Even beyond the most intact virgin, for to Conceive four Children without knowing what it is to have an unchaste thought or Sensual pleasure" (qtd. in Kugler 313). Against the virtue of chastity in orthodox Christianity, Blake does not consider virginity a passive status quo to be protected and preserved. For him, virginity is an active state aspiring to embrace sexual desire in myriad forms. Thus, Oothoon's "woe" represents her sexual aspiration obstructed by

²⁹ Bethan Stevens underlines the difference between Oothoon's "sign" and "woe" at the end of the poem: "The Daughters of Albion hear her woes, & eccho back her sighs" (8.13, *CPPB* 51). He argues that while "woe" is entirely negative, "sigh" denotes a positive aspiration despite the subject's present misery. The division between "sign" and "woe," according to Stevens, is associated with the late eighteenth-century abolition poetry, in which "woe" is often used to describe the desperate status of slaves, but "sigh" is used to express the English spectators' sympathetic (sometime erotic) sentiments for the slaves.

social/religious conventions and unimaginative sexual normalcy.

Driven by her “virgin fear” and “woe,” Oothoon converses with and plucks “the bright Marygold of Leutha’s Vale” (1.5). This episode is commonly interpreted as her initiation to sexual love. Damon and Mellor both read the Marygold as Oothoon’s female genital, with which she equips herself to consummate with Theotormon. From another perspective, Nancy Moore Goslee interprets the plucking as a foretelling of the rape, because “the marigold seems an exuberant smaller version of [Oothoon] herself” (106). In Helen P. Bruder’s view, the plucking is Oothoon’s self-deflowering, a form of female masturbation that enables “her own potential for multiple and recurrent orgasm” and certifies Blake’s “validation of a woman’s right to pleasure herself (75). Jackson-Houlston values the plucking as Blake’s positive depiction of lesbian love of mutual consensus. In addition, the sexual dynamics in plants here is reminiscent of Erasmus Darwin’s *The Loves of the Plants* (1789). Under the cover of botanic science, Darwin employs floral images and their interspecific eroticism to present myriad sexual relations that are free from conventional institute of marriage, with “a fascination with hybridity” and the “illicit loves” (Connolly, “Flowery Form” 604). Early scholars have noted Darwin’s influences on Blake. Erdman recognises that *The Book of Thel* is “Pictorially and metaphorically . . . a counterpart” of Darwin’s *The Loves of the Plants* (qtd. in King-Hele 36). Darwin’s humanisation of plants and their sexuality provides a highly imaginative module for Blake to present his poetic and visual designs. As Desmond King-Hele points out, the anthropomorphic form of Blake’s Marygold resembles “Darwin’s viewing of the amorous antics of the plants” (45).

The design of Plate iii shows Oothoon kneeling down with her hands around her breast, touched by the arm-stretching figure of the nymph (see Figure 1 on page 84). The light emitted from the Marygold is delineated by four radiating lines that go across the shining background. In such a visual display, alongside with Blake’s text, we can observe striking similarities with Darwin’s lines from Canto 4 of *The Loves of the Plants*:

. . . the sad Nymph uplift her dewy eyes,
Spread her white arms, and breathe her fervent sighs;

Call'd to her fair associates, Youth, and Joy,
And shot all-radiant through glittering sky; (4.375-378)

In these lines, Darwin describes the plants whose flowers seem to emit light, including marigold, garden nasturtium, orange lily, and the Indian pink. He speculates that the shining is caused by certain electric activities in the plants, especially when a pistil is impregnated. Describing *tropaeolum*, another kind of shining flower, Darwin presents an erotic interaction between its eight stamens and one pistil:

The chaste TROPAEO leaves her secret bed;
A saint-like glory trembles round her head;
Eight watchful swains along the lawns of night
With amorous steps pursue the virgin light;
O'er her fair form the electric lustre plays (4.45-49)

In line with the *tropaeolum* in *The Loves of the Plants*, the shining Marygold that Oothoon encounters has an inborn sexuality that generates its glorious light illuminating the picture of Plate iii. Furthermore, the *tropaeolum*'s sexual quality is polyandrous, as several males consummate with one female, which subverts the conventional institution of monogamy. Connolly proposes that Darwin frequently italicizes numbers in *The Loves of the Plants* not only because numbers are significant in taxonomy, but also because they produce erotic thrills ("Flowery Porn" 606). In *Visions*, Blake recreates such Darwinian sexual multiplicity in plants, which leads to Oothoon's promiscuous fantasy at the end of the poem, where Theotormon makes love with "girls of mild silver, or of furious gold" in "wanton play" and "lovely copulation" (7.24-25, *CPPB* 50). In Blake studies, Oothoon's aspiration for Theotormon's promiscuous pleasure is often dismissed as Blake's sexist assimilation of the female into the male-centered desire—Oothoon's "slip-sliding away" into "an energetically ensnaring procuress" for men's "harem fantasy" (Bruder 82). Despite this negative evaluation, Saree Makdisi reads this passage as a manifestation of Oothoon's freedom from being "confined, objectified, and turned into a productive mechanism" and from "the confines of unitary selfhood, the pressures of jealousy and possession" (96-97). In the eighteenth century, polygamy had become a widely debated issue. As Faramerz Dabhoiwala points out in *The Origins of Sex*, the discourse on

polygamy flourished with the fundamentalist reading of the Bible (that justifies concubinage), the promotion of sexual freedom as part of the “natural law,” and the newly developed theory on demography. Reflecting this cultural debate on polygamy, Blake adopts the polyandrous anatomy of the flower in Darwin’s work to implant unconventional sexual desire in the Marygold and Oothoon.³⁰ Such a form of desire is not only free from monogamy that aims solely at legitimate reproduction, but also explores the possibility of a woman having multiple husbands, a condition that is absent in the eighteenth-century debate on polygamy, in which only one man taking multiple wives is considered.

From this perspective, we can further determine that the Marygold signifies a form of sexual love that rebels against the one confined in marriage. Oothoon’s “woe” in the opening lines of the poem suggests that her marriage with Theotormon is already an unsatisfactory one concerning sex, even prior to the violent interference of Bromion. Therefore, Oothoon’s initial “virgin fear” and “woe” are also associated with Theotormon, who symbolizes obstructed desire that is “filld with care” (*Milton* 24: 12, *CPPB* 119)—sexual impotence and conservatism necessitated by religious and moral repression. Oothoon’s “woe” is aligned with the complicated sentiment of “pensive woe,” “bitter woe,” and “pleasing woe” in the earlier *Poetic Sketches*. Her “woe” consists of sexual frustration in an unhappy marriage that is alienated from diverse forms of sex. This is the reason that Oothoon seeks inspiration from the Marygold, who, with its Darwinian polyamory, a particularly woman-centred sexuality, provides the heroine the “comfort” that Theotormon is unable to offer.

Oothoon’s subsequent plucking of the Marygold is often read as the prelude to the following rape, as the word “pluck” itself, similar to the more

³⁰ Critics such as Marsha Keith Schuchard and Humberto Garcia have paid attention to Blake’s wish to have concubines. Schuchard attributes it to his early adherence to the doctrines of the Moravian church (234). Garcia, on the other hand, argues for the influences from Emmanuel Swedenborg’s thinking and the English translation of the Qur’an (36). In addition to religious influences, Darwin’s botanic poetics of plants might also inspire Blake’s desire for concubinage and his representation of unconventional sexual orientations in *Visions*.

specific “deflower,” culturally indicates a woman’s loss of virginity by a male violator. As Jackson-Houlson argues, it also embodies a positive lesbian love between Oothoon and the Marygold, which contrasts with heterosexual violence (exemplified by the rape by Bromion). In my reading, even though the plucking seems to be a sexual love based on mutual consent, a potential danger to the Marygold after such an action is hinted by Oothoon’s hesitation: “I dare not pluck thee from thy dewy bed!” (1.7). The nymph’s reply—“pluck thou my flower Oothoon the mild / Another flower shall spring” (1.8-9)—indicates that the action entails the death of the flower plucked, so that a new flower can be born. This conversation implies that sexual love, no matter in what form, causes drastic alteration of the participants’ mental and physical states. In other words, violence is the nature of eroticism, whose outcome is a simulative experience of death, *la petite mort*, “the small death,” a term used to describe “the sensation of orgasm as likened to death” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (“petite mort, n.”). Before *Visions*, Blake has already linked sex with death in the earlier *The Book of Thel*. When Thel enquires about the Cloud’s ephemeral life: “Why thou complainest not when in one hour thou fade away” (3.2 *CPPB* 4). The Cloud answers: “when I pass away, / It is to tenfold life, to love, to peace, and raptures holy” (3.10-11 *CPPB* 5-6). In this line, Blake again correlates eroticism with sacredness as both experiences of self-annihilation that approximates to death. However, death also leads to the enrichment of new lives: the Marygold’s new flower and the Cloud’s “tenfold life.” We can again approach the cycle of sex, death, and life in *The Book of Thel* and *Visions* with Bataille’s another conceptualisation of eroticism.

In the introduction of *Erotism*, Bataille first introduces the ideas of discontinuity and continuity of beings. Bataille believes that there is an unfathomable chasm between a human individual and another: “He is born alone, He dies alone. Between one being and another, there is a gulf, a discontinuity” (*Erotism* 12). To overcome the state of discontinuity, “they unite, and consequently a continuity comes into existence between them to form a new entity from the death and disappearance of the separate beings”

(*Erotism* 14). Thus, eroticism signifies a process in which individual human beings mentally forsake their identities and physically undergo an experience of death, in order to remove the chasm between them—from the state of discontinuity to continuity. Furthermore, the pursuit of the continuity of existence through eroticism is essentially a religious quest; “religious eroticism is bound up with seeking after God’s love” (*Erotism* 16). For Bataille, as well as for Blake, Christianity should be full of violent and erotic passion that is dismissed as obscene in moral conventions. Such an erotic/sacred experience is intrinsically violent, and “The most violent thing of all for us is death which jerks us out of a tenacious obsession with the lastingness of our discontinuous being” (*Erotism* 16).

Approaching Oothoon’s plucking of the Marygold with Bataille’s formulation, we can observe that violence is concealed in this action that appears gentle and harmless, and the nymph’s reply indicates its death and a new life. For Blake, sex is a form of “raptures holy,” a sacred sphere accessed through the death of individuals and the continuity that generates new lives—the “tenfold life” of the Cloud in *The Book of Thel* and “the soul of sweet delight” that “Can never pass away” of the Marygold in *Visions*. Blake’s design of the plucking shows his understanding of sexual experience as a process of violent changes of the participants’ subjectivity. Oothoon and the Marygold both undergo such drastic alterations in their sexual interaction of seemingly mutual consent. Blake not only resonates with Darwin’s *The Loves of the Plants* with the Marygold’s unconventional sexuality, but also anticipates Bataille’s idea of *l’erotisme sacré* by recognising violence as an essential element in sexual desire that shows a path into the sacred—the “raptures holy.” The violent nature of sex that drastically alters human individuals and disturbs subject-object order is also significant in Oothoon’s rape by Bromion. The rape will activate another process of violent changes of Oothoon’s and Theotormon’s subjectivities, in the form of autoeroticism.

Blake describes the rape in only two lines: “Bromion rent her with his thunders. on his stormy bed / Lay the faint maid, and soon her woes appalld his thunders hoarse” (1.16-17). The pictorial images of *Visions* do not show

the rape at all, but only its aftermath at the bottom of Plate 1, where the violator and the victim lie on stormy clouds.³¹ Oothoon is seen lying with her front body upward with both arms opened, exposing her “pure transparent breast” (2.16). One of her legs is shown curling perpendicularly and the other not shown, but judging from her posture we can speculate that the two are separate. In a similar posture, Bromion spreads his legs in an eerily triangular shape, displaying his pubic area with his genital unseen (see Figure 2 on page 85). With this depiction of the consequence of a rape, Blake diminishes the distinction between Bromion the violator and Oothoon the victim by presenting them equally immersed in a post-orgasmic stasis of residual pleasure. The disappearance of Bromion’s genital reinforces the idea that for Blake, sexual experience exerts drastic alternations upon participants, to the degree of self-annihilation. In other words, Blake’s design here neutralises the power relationship between the violator and the victim.

Therefore, Blake has Oothoon, to a certain degree, take pleasure in the violent sex, as Bromion claims that Oothoon represents the slaves who “are obedient,” “resist not,” “obey the scourge,” and “worship terrors and obey the violent” (1.22-23). Marcus Wood perceives in this passage a common stereotypical fantasy in modern pornography that female rape victims enjoy being violated. As Anna Clark’s historical tracing of rape shows, such a fantasy not only appears in modern pornography, but also in the late eighteenth-century libertine literature, inspired by the Enlightenment thinkers’ espousal of sexual desire as a supreme “nature.” Thus, the victim’s resistance is considered “coy acquiescence”—“if a woman says no she really means yes” (Clark 37). Echoing Clark’s observation, Bruder notices a “representation of sexually acquiescent orgasmic collapse” in Oothoon’s image, which reflects the archetypal portrayal of sexually victimized woman who “adores what is above her” in the late eighteenth-century art, especially Henry Fuseli’s works (70). Blake’s design, to some extent, is responsive to

³¹ Some critics do not regard the two figures on Plate 1 as Oothoon and Bromion. For instance, Philippa Simpson sees the masculine one at the right-hand side as a woman opening her thighs to show her vulva, “splayed in a way commonly associated with the hardcore pussy shot” (215). Simpson takes this figure as an example of Blake’s representation of “sexy amputation” that attests to the pornographic propensity of *Visions*.

this literary context, when Bromion claims his ownership of Oothoon, physically and mentally, by suggesting that she does take pleasure in the rape. As critics such as Erdman maintain, Blake intends to criticise the contemporary slave owners with his characterisation of Bromion. However, Blake's visual arrangement of the violator and the victim sharing a similar post-orgasmic complicates the poet's attitude toward rape. The design is even more problematic after we have recognised that Oothoon's plucking of the Marygold contains the ideas of promiscuous sex and erotic violence that approximates to death. In other words, her rape by Bromion fits the unconventional sexual quality that she acquires from the flower. The textual and visual designs of the plucking and the post-orgasmic scene on Plate 1 seem to indicate that Oothoon's "virgin fear" and "woe" somehow call for Bromion's action. What Blake casts here is a question too provocative to be addressed: apart from Bromion's claim as a common fantasy of rapists, if Oothoon truly feels sexual pleasure during the rape, should she be condemned as an accomplice and lose her justified position as an accuser? And a particular notion about sexuality hidden behind this question is the complete disparity between body and soul; to be more specific, Blake seems to suggest that despite mentally afflicted, a rape victim's body can still be aroused by her violator, for whom she holds no love at all.

After the rape, Bromion declares: "Now thou maist marry Bromions harlot, and protect the child / Of Bromions rage, that Oothoon shall put forth in nine moons time" (2.1-2). As Johnson and Grant point out, this is a boast about how pregnancy enhances a female slave's commodity value (*BPD* 59). Theotormon appears and "folded his black jealous waters round the adulterate pair / Bound back to back in Bromions caves terrors & meekness dwell" (2.4-5). This entire scene is engraved on the Frontispiece. Theotormon recoils his body with his two arms around his head, immersing himself in profound grief. Bromion and Oothoon are chained back to back; the former squats with a facial expression of astonishment, and the latter kneels with an emotionless look in her drooping face. Far in the background is a glaring sun among clouds, resembling a human eye—the reader's voyeuristic

spectatorship. According to Dennis M. Welch, Blake presents Theotormon as a self-claimed “offended party, now stripped of an enviable possession” who shows “self-concernment, self-righteousness, and possessiveness” (118). From another perspective, Philippa Simpson argues that this portrayal in the Frontispiece has an effect of “violation, not only of the body shown, but of the eye of the viewer, as its passage over the image is interrupted and unsettled” (215). She also notes the gender ambiguity in the three figures. The bodies of the recoiling Theotormon and the bound Oothoon and Bromion, as Simpson remarks, are depicted as isolated sexualised objects. The design shows the fetishism she terms “sexy amputation” in modern pornography. Blake’s images can indeed be interpreted as potential pornography. Furthermore, there emerges another significant complex in this visual representation of Theotormon other than self-righteousness and possessiveness: autoeroticism, which exemplifies the self-annihilating aesthetics of obscenity.

Reviewing *Visions* with a “queering” lens, Stevens pays attention to the line “storms rent Theotormons limbs; he rolld his waves around” (2.3). This line echoes Oothoon’s rape with the words “storms” and “rent,” thus indicating a “eroticized male-on-male violence” (147). Stevens’s approach materialises and sexualises Theotormon’s suffering, which has been understood as mental in previous Blake studies. My observation of Blake’s design of Theotormon is similar to his approach. Apart from his jealousy, grief, and despair, there is another mental complex hidden in Blake’s design of Theotormon’s posture in the Frontispiece (see Figure 3 on page 86). Theotormon’s legs form a bizarre triangular shape, which is almost identical to Bromion’s in Plate 1; both spread their legs to expose their pubic areas. The difference between the two figures is that Bromion’s upper body and right arm are also stretching open with his head facing upward, while Theotormon’s upper body recoils downward, with his face toward his own unseen genital and his arms encircling his head.

If the triangular image of spreading legs represents a post-orgasmic state, Bromion’s open posture suggests that he is sexually interacting with

others, projecting his desire outwards. The image of Theotormon has the same post-orgasmic undertone, but the enclosed posture of his upper body, formed by the drooping head and interlocking arms, is the opposite of Bromion's open one. Bromion's openness indicates an outward projection of sexual desire, while Theotormon's enclosure denotes an inward self-projection, through which he directs his desire back to himself. Thus, Theotormon's posture can be conceived as a representation of autoeroticism, in Freud's words, "the libido-cathexis" retracted from the exterior world to focus on the subject's own self and body ("On the Introduction of Narcissism" 5). The withdrawal of sexual desire from others to self is caused by extreme mental distress, which Freud later illustrates as melancholia: "a profoundly painful depression, a loss of interest in the outside world, the loss of ability to love, the inhibition of any kind of performance and a reduction in the sense of self, expressed in self-recrimination and self-directed insults, intensifying into the delusory expectation of punishment" ("Mourning and Melancholia" 204). As the aftermath of his lover's rape, Theotormon's static image on the Frontispiece consists of the enclosed upper body of libido-withdrawal and the triangular lower body of autoerotic self-projection. The passage on Plate 2 following the binding of "the adulterate pair" also presents Theotormon's mental state of the Freudian melancholia and autoeroticism. The description of "Theotormon sits wearing the threshold hard" (2.6) reinforces the sense of his "inhibition of performance," and the phrase "secret tears" stresses the unnameable nature of his distress. Furthermore, Theotormon's imagined self-flagellation on Plate 6 anticipates "the delusory expectation of punishment" in the symptoms of Freudian melancholia.

In his discussion, Freud distinguishes pathological melancholia from normal mourning. Although both mental conditions are caused by the loss of love-object, in mourning this sense of loss is conscious/presentable, while in melancholia it is unconscious/unpresentable. This distinction brings forth the key element of melancholia: "an extraordinary reduction in self-esteem, a great impoverishment of the ego" ("Mourning and Melancholia" 205). In Theotormon's case, he cannot undergo the normal process of mourning and

regain his ability to interact with the outside world, because what he truly loses is not Oothoon as a love-object, but his selfhood and social identity as a heterosexual lover/husband. Theotormon's impotence or refusal to have premarital sex in his conjugal relationship with Oothoon causes her early "woes" and indirectly results in her rape by Bromion. The loss of self-esteem and positive identity due to sexual inability is, for Theotormon, unnameable, and this is the reason for his immobilisation and self-enclosure. But in this state of withdrawal, Theotormon channels his libido, "the burning fires / Of lust" (2.9-10), into his own autoerotic lower body by emulating Bromion's post-orgasmic posture on Plate 1. That is, after recognising Oothoon's possible pleasure in the rape, he attempts to identify with Bromion's sexual potency and violence, further shattering his identity as a loving husband in this autoerotic experience of self-annihilation.

Blake's view of autoeroticism in *Visions* has been addressed in scholarly discussions. Critics generally focus on Oothoon's latter denouncement of such a behaviour as an unhealthy outcome of sexual repression by religious doctrines—"the rewards of continence" and "The self enjoyings of self denial" (7.8-9). Christopher Hobson maintains that Blake regards masturbation as an unconventional sexual behaviour that stands for liberation (*Blake and Homosexuality* 36), while Richard Sha refutes Hobson by highlighting its conflict with Blake's ideal of mutual affection in sexual interactions between individuals (204-205). But Blake's autoerotic design of Theotormon on the Frontispiece and Plate 1 has not attracted much critical attention. As the above analysis with Freud's discourse on melancholia shows, Theotormon's autoeroticism is triggered by his unnameable loss of self-esteem and social identity as a husband due to his sexual impotence, which forms his enclosure and withdrawal from the external world. His lower body, on the other hand, emulates Bromion's post-orgasmic posture. By secretly identifying the rapist's violence, the autoerotic Theotormon undergoes the obscene process of self-annihilation.

Viewed from the perspective of contemporary discourse on masturbation, Blake's design here also resonates with Samuel-August

Tissot's 1760 treatise *An Essay on Onanism, or a Treatise upon the Disorders produced by Masturbation: or the Dangerous Effects of Secret and Excessive Venery*, whose popularity in Blake's time has been certified in scholarly works (Jordanova 70). With two English translations published respectively in 1766 and 1772, it is highly possible that Blake knew or read Tissot's notable treatise that shapes the negative view of masturbation in following decades. Tissot's account of masturbation is based on a central idea of "animal economy" that generally consists of the processes of "waste" and "reparation." These two processes are actualised by the generation, circulation, and consumption of humours. In Tissot's work, there is a hierarchy of humours in terms of their importance in the body. After pointing out that milk is much more dispensable than blood, he emphasises the crucial status of semen: "the loss of an ounce of this humour would weaken more than that of forty ounces of blood" (10). If such a loss occurs in "unnatural" ways, the ill consequences are even more severe. For example, seminal issue in conjugal intercourse does less damage to the body than that from sexual intercourse with prostitutes; nocturnal emission is less harmful than masturbation, because the former happens unconsciously, while the latter is a deliberate behaviour of unrestrained lust. Apparently, Tissot's scientific treatise is tinged with moral sensitivity. This ideology is also reflected in John Armstrong's 1742 poetic essay *Oeconomy of Love*, where masturbation is dismissed as "ungenerous, selfish, solitary Joy" and "Unhallow'd pastime" that will "shed they Blossoms thro' desert air, / And sow they perish'd Off-spring in the wind" (7-8). As one of the most "unnatural" ways to lose semen, masturbation not only damages the body, but also causes the masturbator's mental catastrophe. In addition to physical symptoms such as weakened sight, pimples, underweight, and fatigue, masturbation will weaken "all the bodily senses and all the faculties of the soul" and result in

the loss of imagination and memory; and imbecility, contempt, shame, ignominy; . . . the humiliating character of being an useless load upon the earth; . . . a distaste for all decent pleasures; lassitude, an aversion for others, and at length for self; life appears horrible; the dread which every

moment starts at suicide; anguish worse than pain; remorse, which daily increases; . . . and serves as eternal punishment—a fire that is never extinguished. (Tissot 126)

Ludmilla Jordanova detects in this passage the impacts of masturbation upon a man's self-recognition and social identification. In Tissot's view, masturbation signifies the utter loss of one's sense of identity as a social being, becoming "an useless load upon the earth." Despite this negative effect, Jordanova points out that Tissot's description "suggests an element of pleasure derived from the recounting of pain and misery of others" (75). In other words, Tissot's style of writing about sexuality invites readers to imagine the masturbator's situation—the lust he indulges himself in, and the dreadful consequences he has to suffer—and take pleasure in this process of imagination. That is, Tissot's description renders masturbation, frequently called "the feats" in the treatise, not only frightening but also perversely attractive. The unique pleasure of masturbation is also highlighted by contemporary botanist Bellenden Ker, who claims that "there is more pleasure in frigging one's self, considered in merely a sensual way" than having sex with women (qtd. in Dabhoiwala 178).

In Tissot's treatise, the mental mechanism in masturbation consists of the self-annihilating process of forsaking one's social identity and its "function" and "purposefulness." The masturbator belittles himself in humiliation and shame, which are blended with the bodily pleasure, and obtains an obscene sensation of masochism. To sum up, despite listing meticulously the fearful pathological damages masturbation causes on the body, Tissot's writing, perhaps unconsciously, indicates that such an "unnatural" and obscene behaviour grants the doer a unique pleasure that cannot be obtained through "natural" sexual intercourse. The potential autoeroticism of Theotormon in *Vision* certainly reflects Tissot's description, as it is also set in a humiliating situation where the social identities of Theotormon as a husband and Oothoon as a wife are broken. Also, the metaphor for autoeroticism that Blake and Tissot use are quite similar: "the burning fires / Of lust, that belch incessant" and "a fire that is never extinguished." In other words, in *Visions*, Blake reflects Tissot's observation

in terms of the negative effects of masturbation when he has Oothoon later call it “The self enjoyings of self denial.” In Theotormon’s case, the autoerotic state is generated through the breaking of his social identity as a husband/lover by facing his own impotence and emulating Bromion’s sexual violence, a self-annihilating experience. Blake takes his idea of autoeroticism further in Oothoon’s calling for self-punishment. It is where Blake departs from Tissot’s assertion that autoeroticism results in “the loss of imagination.” Conversely, Blake regards autoeroticism—a passive behaviour of torpidity for Tissot—an active process of poetic imagination. At this point, Blake’s view of autoeroticism goes beyond Tissot’s discourse. As I will demonstrate, it has more resonances with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *The Confessions*, an autobiographic text that Blake is familiar with.³²

In the Frontispiece, Oothoon’s responses to Theotormon’s autoerotic status with her own autoerotic fantasy of self-punishment, “calling Theotormon’s Eagles to prey upon her flesh”:

I call with holy voice! kings of the sounding air,
Rend away this defiled bosom that I may reflect.
The image of Theotormon on my pure transparent breast.
(2.14-16)

Though the following line “The Eagles at her call descend & rend their bleeding prey” seems to tell readers that this actually happens in the poem, the visual design on Plate 3 suggests otherwise. The image on Plate 3 clearly contradicts the previous scene on the Frontispiece (see Figure 4 on page 87). On Plate 3, Oothoon is no longer in the dark cave and is free from the chains that bind her with Bromion. She is seen lying on clouds with her limbs stretching open, exposing her breast to the descending eagle. The surreal air of Plate 3 indicates that this entire violent scene is in Oothoon’s imagination. If we take a look at the end of *Visions*: “Thus every morning wails Oothoon. but Theotormon sits / Upon the margind ocean conversing

³² In Blake’s earlier prophetic books, Rousseau and Voltaire are depicted as the positive momentum of the French Revolution. But Blake does not share their deistic view of religion that denies prophetic visionary and poetic imagination. In *Jerusalem*, Rousseau, along with Voltaire, Gibbon, and Hume, is accused of hypocrisy, and his *The Confessions* is dismissed by Blake: “The Book written by Rousseau calld his Confessions is an apology & cloke for his sin & not a confession” (CPPB 201). See also Damon’s *A Blake Dictionary*, pp. 351-352.

with shadows dire. / The Daughters of Albion hear her woes, & eccho back her sighs" (8.11-13) in advance, it is clear that the real action in the poem takes place until Theotormon binds Oothoon and Bromion together. All the subsequent scenes engraved visually and described textually are merely imagination rather than actual actions. In other words, Oothoon's torture by an eagle on Plate 3, Theotormon's self-flagellation on Plate 6, and the ecstatic orgy on Plate 7 all belong to their erotic fantasy.

Oothoon's self-mutilation as a rape victim reminds us of Oithona in James Macpherson's *Fingal*, one of the most prominent sources of Vision. In this epic poem, after being raped by Dunromath, Oithona condemns herself in shame in front of her lover, Gaul: "why comest thou over the dark-blue wave, to Nuäh's daughter? Why did I not pass away in secret?" She then immerses herself in despair: "I vanish in my youth; my name shall not be heard. Or it will be heard with grief; the tears of Nuäh must fall" (Macpherson 108). Oithona's reaction to her rape while facing her lover is entirely passive. She denies her own physical existence and social identity and wishes to be absent in her lover's presence. Following Oothoon's counterpart in *Fingal*, Blake seems to recreate the self-accusation of rape victim in *Visions*. As Welch points out, the victim's impulse for self-punishment in a case of rape is not uncommon, since it was usually the violated woman rather the male violator that was condemned in the late eighteenth century (121). Oothoon's call for self-mutilation, though more or less reflective of this women-victimizing tradition, is a subtle manifestation of poetic imagination.

Oothoon, following Theotormon, is also undergoing a process of autoerotic fantasy by imaging herself willingly being violated again. The image of an eagle rending its victim's breast apart alludes to Prometheus, who is a symbol of rebellion and sacrifice. Despite the possible political or religious appeals, Blake eroticises Oothoon's imagined Promethean posture, as she arches her body in a manner that again resembles the post-orgasmic images on Plate 1. On Plate 3, Blake epitomises Oothoon's fantasy of bodily affliction, presenting an obscene scene of erotic violence, a darker aspect of sex that she first acquaints herself with through the plucking of Marygold, and

her rape by Bromion. For Oothoon, violence and suffering are now the essential elements of sexual delight, as she declares: "Sweetest the fruit that worm feeds on. & the soul prey'd on by woe" (3.17-18). The erotic pleasure is "Sweetest" when it is engendered by victimisation and destruction. Therefore, that Oothoon calls for eagles to mutilate her body is not only a penitent display of shame and guilt (generated by the pleasure that she might take in the rape) but also an exposition of an alternative aspect of sex that entails violent maiming of the body and its intense pain.

As I propose previously, autoeroticism for Blake is not only an inactive and desperate resort under sexual repression, but a process of active imagination that enables the doer to achieve alternative pleasure. Oothoon's female masturbation is identified by other scholars on Plate 7: "The moment of desire! the moment of desire! The virgin / That pines for man; shall awaken her womb to enormous joys / In the secret shadows of her chamber" (7.3-5). But her self-mutilating vision on Plate 3 can also be read as an autoerotic fantasy, in which the real object of her desire is absent. She has to conjure up the eagle as the sexual "other" and imagine herself again in a victimised position. This process suggests that the operation of such a fantasy requires a disintegration of her identity. As a sexual subject, Oothoon splits into two: a violating other and a violated self. The disintegration of self and the recasting of subjectivity in autoeroticism also appear in Rousseau's *The Confessions*, a work that Blake dismisses as self-apologetic and hypocritical. Blake's hostility to Rousseau is attributed to the French philosopher's deistic ideology that denies Blake's ideal of prophetic vision/Poetic Genius. However, in terms of sexuality, both writers work in depth to explore the mentality of autoeroticism.

As Karen Harvey's study shows, with a stronger stress on sensual/bodily experience, eighteenth-century thinkers, especially those from France, aligned their philosophies "with a veritable unleashing of sexual desires" (200). Among them, Rousseau is particularly concerned with the sexual relation between men and women in larger social and political contexts. According to Joel Schwartz, Rousseau believes that male sexual desire for women constitutes the mutual dependence between the two sexes,

which is a positive drive to ameliorate the society and accomplish “the political betterment of mankind” (3). Autoeroticism—the withdrawal of sexual desire from the external world—is therefore a harmful hindrance of such social improvement, as masturbation is forbidden in *Emile* so that a mature man can “enter society . . . to find there a companion worthy of him” (qtd. Schwartz 105). Despite this understanding of autoeroticism as an anti-social complex, masturbation is still a seductive “feat”—in Tissot’s word—that Rousseau indulges himself in. Joel Schwartz distinguishes Rousseau’s romantic relationship with Thérèse Levasseur, a common and illiterate woman, in *The Confessions* from Emile’s relationship with Sophie in *Emile*. He points out that while the latter is based on mutual affection, the former is entirely of physical sexual desire. Rousseau’s relationship with Thérèse, as Schwartz highlights, is referred to as “supplement,” a word Rousseau also uses to describe his masturbation in *The Confessions* (104-105). For Rousseau, the sex with Thérèse and masturbation are both substitutes for his real love object that is absent. But the two substitutes are in essence different, because unlike the sex with Thérèse, masturbation is not only a supplement, but also “that dangerous supplement.”³³ In Book 3 of *The Confessions*, Rousseau gives a personal account of his masturbation, “that dangerous means of cheating Nature”:

This vice, which shame and timidity find so convenient, has, besides, great enticement for lively imaginations; that is, to dispose, in a manner, at will of the whole sex, and to make the beauties which tempt them serve their pleasure without the necessity of obtaining their consent. (146)

And in Book 9, in a distress of sexual longing without a real woman’s presence, he admits his “vice” in a suggestive way:

³³ This phrase inspires Jacques Derrida’s analysis of writing and speech. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida discusses his concept of writing as a “dangerous supplement” to speech by examining Rousseau’s *The Confessions*, in which Rousseau “valorises and disqualifies writing at the same time” and “condemns writing as destruction of presence and as disease of speech” (141-142). Like Rousseau’s writing, which only offers an endless chain of deferrals of true meaning (Derrida’s concept of *différance*), his masturbation is also *ce dangereux supplement* that can never allow him to obtain the real and healthy fulfilment of desire: “The supplement that ‘cheats’ maternal ‘nature’ operates as writing, and as writing it is dangerous to life . . . so onanism announces the ruin of vitality in terms of imaginary seductions” (151).

The impossibility of attaining the real beings threw me into the regions of chimera; and seeing nothing in existence worthy of my delirium I sought food for it in the ideal world, which my imagination quickly peopled with beings after my own heart . . . In my continual extacy I intoxicated my mind with the most delicious sentiments that ever entered the heart of a man. (229)

In the above passages (from the English translation published in 1783) that are possibly read by Blake, Rousseau aestheticises his experience of masturbation by accentuating its artistic quality of “lively imagination,” in order to create images that generate utmost pleasure in his mind. Also, because the object of desire is absent, Rousseau, in the process of masturbation, has to enter “the regions of chimera”—a phrase that denotes the splitting of subjectivity. In an autoerotic ecstasy, where the subject imagines his love objects, his subjectivity must be divided to put on several identities, like the Chimera who is at the same time a lion, a goat, and a serpent. It is also a process of dissolving the conventional boundary of gender roles, as Schwartz notes that Rousseau’s experiences in reading and imagination make him “both female and male, which is to say that he transcends the differentiation between the sexes, and is a human whole, not merely a sexual part” (107). This androgynous mentality of Rousseau’s corresponds to Blake’s ideal of the “Universal Man,” a primary state of humanity that reunites the separate masculine “Spectre” and feminine “Emanation.” Despite that Blake deems *The Confessions* a work of hypocrisy, there is subtle resonance between Blake and Rousseau, in terms of sexual experience, which is analogous to artistic creation.

Back to *Visions* with Rousseau’s resonance, in her autoerotic fantasy, Oothoon activates her “lively imagination” to splits her subjectivity and form an imagery scene of another erotic violence on Plate 3. This is exactly Rousseau’s access to the masturbatory “regions of chimera” and “ideal world, which my imagination quickly peopled with beings after my own heart.” With the active potency of imagination, Oothoon calls for Theotormon’s violence on herself. As both a victim and a masochist, Oothoon paradoxically

demonstrates the power of powerlessness and the activeness of passivity. As Gilles Deleuze points out in his discussion of masochism, “the masochist hero appears to be educated and fashioned by the authoritarian woman whereas basically it is he who forms her, dresses her for the part and prompts the harsh words she addresses to him” and “It is the victim who speaks through the mouth of his torturer, without sparing herself” (22).³⁴ By urging Theotormon to mutilate her “defiled bosom,” Oothoon actually takes control of the imperative language in this masochist play, “profoundly active in her passivity,” in Susan Sontag’s words (99).

Welch underscores the distinction between “this defiled bosom” and “my pure transparent breast” in Oothoon’s lines, arguing that her call for self-mutilation is an assertion of her untainted essence, in order to “distinguish between her true self and her unwillingly defiled exterior” (121). But more than a defence of her essential innocence, with self-disintegrating imagination of autoeroticism, Oothoon is actually denouncing Theotormon’s sexual impotence and conservatism, which indirectly cause her unwillingly bodily arousal in the rape, and his later inactivity and self-victimization. With the typical emotional withdrawal and enclosure in the Freudian melancholia—“she cannot weep! her tears are locked up” (2.11 *CPPB* 46)—Oothoon’s lamentations are intrinsically accusations, as Freud postulates: “they are not ashamed, they do not conceal themselves, because everything disparaging that they express about themselves is basically being said about someone else” (“Mourning and Melancholia” 208). What Oothoon says about her dire state limited by five senses in the later part of Plate 2 is truly indicating Theotormon’s inability to see through her polluted exterior (“this defiled bosom”), acknowledge her intact interior (“my pure transparent breast”), and act like a real husband/lover. Instead, Theotormon’s selfhood based on the identity of husband/lover has already been annihilated in his autoerotic emulation of Bromion’s sexual violence, an abject situation Oothoon discloses with the line “all from life I was obliterated and erased” (2.

³⁴ Deleuze is referring to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs*, in which the male protagonist is the masochist and receives verbal and physical violence from his female lover.

34 *CPPB* 47).

Theotormon fails to understand the profound meaning of Oothoon's call for self-mutilation: "Theotormon hears me not! to him the night and morn / Are both alike" (2.37-38 *CPPB* 47); what he sees now is only a picture of autoerotic and masochist fantasy. Consequently, Theotormon undergoes further drastic alterations of his subjectivity. He perceives Oothoon's autoerotic imagination, and "severely smiles, her soul reflects the smile; / As the clear spring mudded with feet of breasts grows pure & smiles" (2.18-19 *CPPB* 46). Here Theotormon is not only a humiliated husband but also a thrilled spectator of the erotic violence that Oothoon puts on through her "lively imagination." His "smiles" upon "the clear spring mudded with feet of beasts"—a recapitulation of Oothoon's rape by Bromion—corresponds to his emulation of and identification with the rapist's sexual violence on the Frontispiece. Such is the obscene pleasure taken by Theotormon, engendered by the maiming and degradation of a beautiful body in the condition of forsaking his previous identity as husband/lover, the condition of self-annihilation.³⁵ In his discussion of spectacular violence in Romantic imagination, Ian Haywood points out that in the triangular relationship of a victimiser, a victim, and a spectator, there is a certain "configuration of multiple points of view" that "breaks down the binary opposition of self and Other which is implied in the simplistic view-victim model" (6). Oothoon's eagle-rent image on Plate 3 and Theotormon's autoerotic reaction as a spectator demonstrates such a "triangular vignette" in which both characters alter their identities in a drastic manner, as Oothoon becomes simultaneously victim and victimiser and Theotormon breaks his social identity as a husband to take pleasure in Oothoon's second violation. The visual presentation of Plate 3 also reminds us of Blake's illustrations of John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolted Negros of Surinam*. Blake's designs of black slaves suffering tortures seem to evoke sympathy and abolition sentiments in his time. However, the representation is

³⁵ Likewise, for Bataille, violence against the beautiful body is the essence of eroticism: "Beauty has a cardinal importance, for ugliness cannot be spoiled, and to despoil is the essence of eroticism . . . The greater the beauty the more it is befouled" (*Eroticism* 145).

problematic for his erotic way of portraying afflicted human bodies, “relating to the trans-historical nature of aesthetics, torture, the fetish, and pornography,” as Wood correctly observes (94).

To conclude this section, I will turn to Bromion’s lines on Plate 4. Though allegorically Bromion represents plantation slavery and patriarchal oppression in Blake’s time, this antagonist articulates the obscene truth of eroticism for Blake. After the lengthy and abstract conversation between Oothoon and Theotormon about the restriction of human perception, Bromion cuts in with a tempting voice to urge Theotormon to “gratify senses unknown”:

Thou knowest that the ancient trees seen by thine eyes have fruit;
But knowest thou that trees and fruits flourish upon the earth
To gratify senses unknown? trees beasts and birds unknown:
Unknown, not unperceivd, spread in the infinite microscope,
In places yet unvisited by the voyager. and in worlds
Over another kind of seas, and in atmospheres unknown.
(4.13-18)

Stevens proposes that the “senses unknown” in Bromion’s speech “alludes to a less conventional sexuality” (149). Her argument is based on her queer interpretation that Theotormon is also mentally and physically raped by Bromion, who is suggesting homosexual anal sex as an unspeakable alternative pleasure. In line with Stevens’s “queering” perspective, I would argue that Bromion here is referring to a wider scope of sexuality that is dismissed as “obscene” in the eighteenth century. Excluded into “places yet unvisited,” “worlds / Over another kind of seas,” and “atmospheres unknown,” the obscene encompasses all heterogeneous aspects of sex. It is embodied in Oothoon’s plucking of the Marygold, which represents polyamorous orgy and erotic approximation to death, the rape itself as a violent embodiment of sex, and the autoerotic fantasy that entails the disintegration of identity and subjectivity. All these heterogeneous experiences exemplify the core phenomenon of obscenity: self-annihilation. Oothoon and Theotormon abandon their previous social identities, which are constituted by conventional gender roles in marriage system. With poetic imagination, they actively put themselves in passive and masochist positions to obtain the

obscene pleasure that goes beyond the concept of “free love” based on the wholeness of individuality and the mutually positive affection between them. In conclusion, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* is still a piece that serves its justified end to criticise slavery and religious oppression, but its covert “minute particulars” unveil Blake’s understanding of the obscene side of sex. From the obscene, the heterogeneous pleasure emerges from the violent effusion of negative energy that annihilates self and dissolves subjectivity.

The Argument

I loved Theotarmon
And I was not ashamed
I trembled in my virgin fears
And I hid in Leutha's vale!

I plucked Leutha's flower,
And I rose up from the vale;
But the terrible thunders tore
My virgin mantle in twain.



47
3 18
116

Figure 1. Plate iii of *Visions*, copy A, 1793 (British Museum)

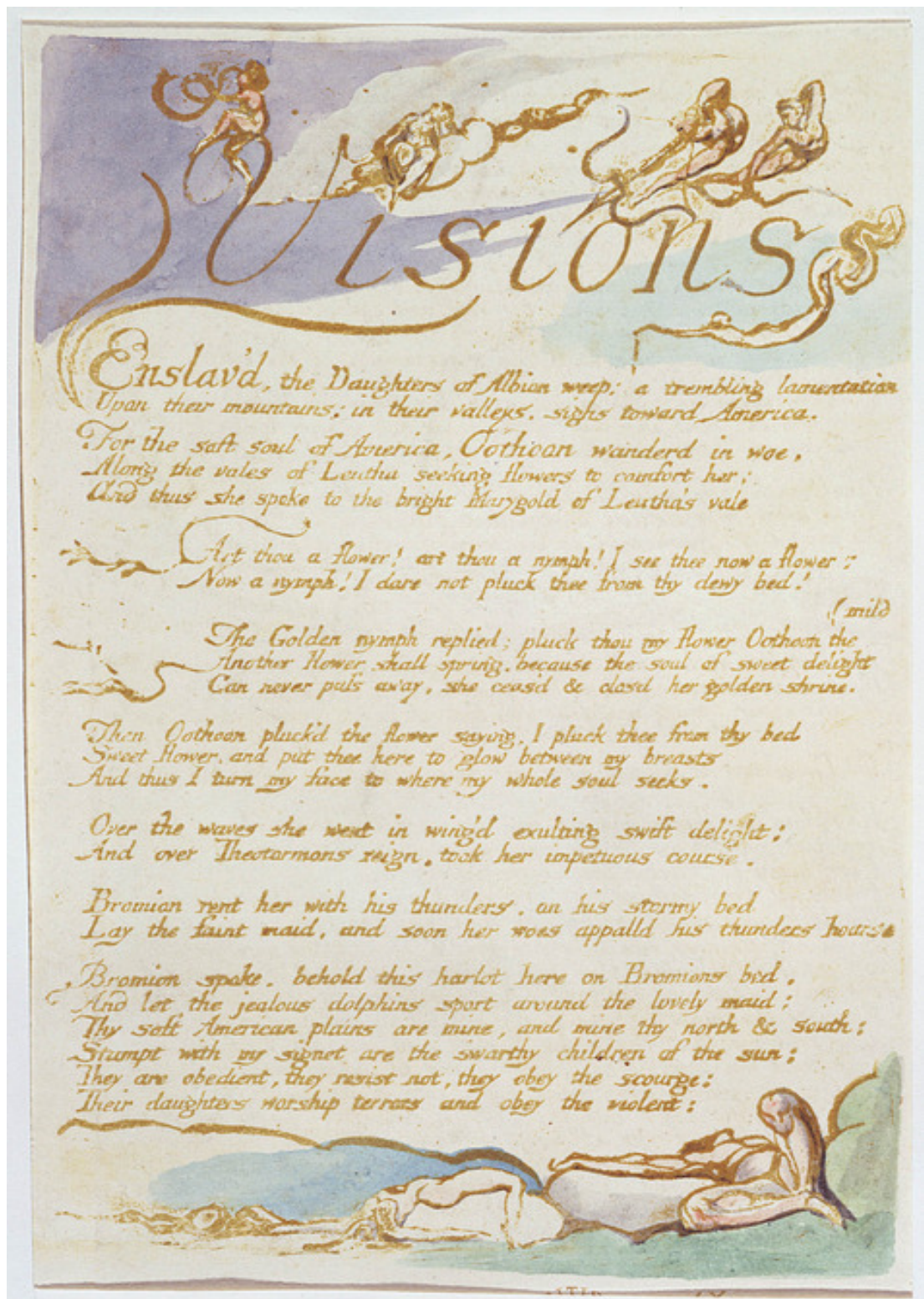


Figure 2. Plate 1 of *Visions*, copy A, 1793 (British Museum)



Figure 3. Frontispiece of *Visions*, copy A, 1793 (British Museum)

And none but Bromian can hear my lamentations.

With what sense is it that the chicken shuns the ravenous hawk?
With what sense does the tame pigeon measure out the expanse?
With what sense does the bee form cells? have not the mouse & frog
Eyes and ears and sense of touch, yet are their habitations.
And their pursuits, as different as their forms and as their joys:
Ask the wild ass why he refuses burdens; and the meek camel
Why he loves man; is it because of eye ear mouth or skin
Or breathing nostrils? No, for these the wolf and tiger have.
Ask the blind worm the secrets of the grave, and why her spires
Love to curl round the bones of death; and ask the ravenous snake
Where she gets poison; & the winged eagle why he loves the sun.
And then tell me the thoughts of man, that have been hid of old.

Silent I hover all the night, and all day could be silent.
If Theotormon once would turn his loved eyes upon me;
How can I be defiled when I reflect thy image pure? (wee
Sweetest the fruit that the worm feeds on, & the soul preys on by
The new washed lamb ting'd with the village smoke & the bright swan
By the red earth of our immortal river; I bathe my wings,
And I am white and pure to hover round Theotormon's breast.

Then Theotormon broke his silence, and he answered.

Tell me what is the night or day to one o'erflow'd with woe?
Tell me what is a thought? & of what substance is it made?
Tell me what is a joy; & in what gardens do joys grow?
And in what rivers swim the sorrows, and upon what mountains



Figure 4. Plate 3 of *Visions*, copy A, 1793 (British Museum)

Milton: a Poem, written and engraved first in 1804, is Blake's poetic endeavour to "rectify" his greatest precursor John Milton and his works, and "avowedly to correct Milton's errors" (Damon 276). The epic poem relates how Milton, now "pondring the intricate mazes of Providence / Unhappy tho in heav'n" (2.17), descends once again to the secular world (a scene set in Blake's cottage at Felpham) to reunite with his "Sixfold Emanation"—his estranged three wives and three daughters.³⁶ More crucially, this journey leads Milton to be incorporated into Blake, himself a character in the poem, in order to re-establish his poetic status as a national bard. As Mary Lynn Johnson comments, Milton "breaks through warps in time, space, and consciousness to correct his personal and doctrinal errors and rekindles, through Blake, the spirit of prophecy in Britain" and to fulfil "the transmission of his prophetic legacy to Blake's generation" (233). In the Preface, Blake dismisses "The Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer & Ovid: of Plato & Cicero" that mislead even the greatest poets such as Shakespeare and Milton. Blake then calls for the restoration of "the Sublime of the Bible" (*CPPB* 95). Instead of reconsidering Blake's revision of his precursors, this section will focus on "the Bard's Song" in Book 1 of *Milton*, especially the bizarre characterisation of Satan that subverts the more recognised energetic devil in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Continuing my central theme of the obscene, I seek to demonstrate that under Blake's majestic aspiration in *Milton* to "speak to future generations by a Sublime Allegory" (in his 1803 letter to Thomas Butts, *CPPB* 730), he engages Burke's idea of the sublime that he despises and deliberately presents an image of anti-Burkean sublime with the effeminised Satan. In *Visions*, the Blakean obscene is presented through Oothoon's and Theotormon's autoeroticism that annihilates the social identities of husband and wife, while in *Milton*, it is insinuated by subverting the more fundamental identity of sex and gender, which are constructed by the conceptualisation of the masculine and the feminine in

³⁶ The text of *Milton*, from Erdman's edition, is also referenced with plate and line numbers in parenthesis.

contemporary Britain.

To discuss *Milton*, which is relatively longer, more obscure, and therefore more challenging, it is necessary to provide a brief summary of the poem. As aforementioned, the major purpose of *Milton* the poem is to correct the errors of Milton the poet. In the title page, a full-page design of Milton's naked figure faces the stormy darkness in the background. Milton raises his right hand, as if he intends to wipe out the clouds that obscure his sight, but at the same time his hand breaks the title, his very name "MILTON," in half. This gesture already foreshadows the symbolic theme of his self-annihilation at the end of the poem. The relatively small and unclear subtitle under Milton's feet repeats one of his poetic purposes set in *Paradise Lost*: "To justify the Ways of God to Men." Blake only takes the second part of Milton's original declaration: "I may assert Eternal Providence / And justify the ways of God to men" (*Paradise Lost* 1.24-25). That is, in Blake's view, with *Paradise Lost* Milton only successfully asserts the divine decree but fails to justify it, and the justification is to be done in Blake's own epic poem. Milton's failure are attributed to his errors, which, as Blake senses in *Paradise Lost* and Milton's life, include his depiction of Satan as the manifestation of revolutionary hero against tyranny (as highlighted ironically in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*), his Calvinist theology of the three classes of the Elect, the Reprobate, and the Redeemed, his over-reliance on the classic poetics of military feats and warlike glory ("the silly Greek & Latin slaves of the Sword"), and his negative evaluation of women reflected by the characterisation of Eve and his own disquieted domestic life.³⁷

Although on the surface these errors can be divided into different categories of religion, politics, poetics, and gender, they are all intertwined

³⁷ Milton's proposal of divorce based on the incompatibility between husband and wife is partially propelled by his first marriage with Mary Powell, who ran back to her parents' home one month after they married. She could not stand the quiet and dull scholar's life of Milton, and on the other hand, Milton considered her incapable of participating in his intellectual and poetic activities. His second marriage with Katherine Woodcock was happy but discontinued by her death two years after they married; the deep grief led to his composition of the piercingly bitter sonnet "Mee thought I saw my late espoused saint." His last marriage with Elizabeth Minshull was satisfactory but disturbed by her discordance with Milton's daughters. See Barbara K. Lewalski's critical biography *The Life of John Milton* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2002).

with each other and the issue of sexuality has a significant presence among them. Near the end of the poem, all what Milton errs in his lifetime and works are to be amended by his reconciliation with his wives and daughters. These women in Milton's life are his "Feminine Portion the Six-fold Miltonic Female" (41.30), which is embodied by Ololon, the twelve-year-old virgin. Milton's union with Ololon thus symbolises the re-integration of divided sexes. What inspires Milton to embark on his descent into the material world is an enigmatic "Bard's prophetic Song," an episodic narrative that cuts in abruptly shortly after the Preface. The Bard's Song first introduces the current cosmological state after the disintegration of Albion the primary "human form divine," "when Albion was slain upon his Mountains" (3.1). For Blake, the creation of the world by a demiurgic sky-god such as Jehovah in the Old Testament is itself a fall, because of the ensuing establishment of institutionalised religion and moral laws.³⁸ This concept can be observed in Blake's design of the Frontispiece of *Europe: a Prophecy*, where the hoary Urizen, Jehovah's counterpart in Blake's mythical system, measures and delineates the material world with a compass. In this limited circumstance, Los—"the expression in this world of Creative Imagination" (Damon 246)—and his female Emanation, Enitharmon, construct the three classes of men. This division is later revealed as the Calvinist categorisation of the Elect, the Redeemed, and the Reprobate, which is decreed by Milton's God in *Paradise Lost* (Johnson 255). The human sensual faculties are also separated and confined and "a seventh Age passed over & a State of dismal woe" (3.27). On Plate 3, witnessing the degeneration of the material world, "Terrified" in "deadly pale," Los himself disintegrates; "he became what he beheld" (3.29), and his mentality splits into "a Female pale" (3.33) and "a Male Form howling in Jealousy" (3.36). To sustain this flawed world, Los and Enitharmon build "the Looms of Generation" and "Great Golgonooza," the city of art and manufacture (Damon 162). The city of Golgonooza operates with the

³⁸ This unique understanding of God as an evil entity and the creation of the material world as a degeneration is related to Gnosticism. For the Gnostic influences on Blake, see A. D. Nuttall's *The Alternative Trinity: Gnostic Heresy in Marlowe, Milton, and Blake* (Oxford UP, 2007).

symbolic representation of agriculture by the children of Los and Enitharmon, including Rintrah, Palamabron, and most importantly, Satan.

A bizarre family quarrel ensues. The envious Satan, who is assigned the work in “the Starry Mills,” wishes to take over Palamabron’s station of “the fiery Harrow” and implores Los to give the Harrow to him. The “dark Satanic Mill” from the poem in the Preface is not only the metaphor of exploitative industry in the contemporary Britain, but represents the ideology of rigid rationalism that Blake attributes to Lock and Newton (Johnson 239). It is a sharp contrast with Palamabron’s harrowing, which stands for creative and enlivening artistic cultivation.³⁹ At this point, Los makes a crucial judgmental error by giving Satan “the Harrow of the Almighty” (7.10). The wronged brother Palamabron retains his silence in repressed wrath, for he fears that “Satan should accuse him of / Ingratitude” (7.11-12). Consequently, Los’s enterprise is completely shut down in chaos: Palamabron’s horses of the Harrow are maddened and the Gnomes (the workers) are disturbed. The two brothers accuse each other of hypocrisy and turpitude before Los sets them back to their normal positions. But Satan’s Mills are now dysfunctional because of his absence, for which he blames Palamabron. While Los laments his erroneous pity on Satan that “divides the soul / And man, unmans” (8.19-20), Palamabron realises “That he who will not defend Truth, may be compelled to / Defend a Lie” (8.47-48) and calls for a “Great Solemn Assembly” (8.46) to settle the score.

In the Assembly, Satan reveals his true nature by identifying with the Old-Testament God and Urizen: “He created Seven deadly Sins drawing out his infernal scroll, / Of Moral laws and cruel punishments upon the clouds of Jehovah” (9.21-22). And “the dark Satanic Mills” are now surrounding the human world, as foretold in the poem in the Preface: “And was Jerusalem built here / Among the dark Satanic Mills” (*CPPB* 95). In the human world, Satan makes “Laws from his own identity. / Compell’d others to serve him in

³⁹ Blake illustrates this differentiation in *A Descriptive Catalogue* of his 1809 exhibition: “The Plowman of Chaucer is Hercules in his supreme eternal state . . . the Miller, a terrible fellow . . . with brutal strength and courage, to get rich and powerful to curb the pride of Man” (*CPPB* 536).

moral gratitude & submission / Being call'd God" (11.10-12). This Satanic religion represents the state church and its oppressive laws, as well as the national expansion of imperialism (*BPD* 158). At this point, another strange incident follows. Leutha, the female character who symbolises "sex under law" and "the sense of sin, or guilt" (Damon 237), appears in the Assembly. She wishes to take the blame, as "a Ransom for Satan, taking on her, his Sin" (11.30). As early critics have noted, the relationship between Satan and Luetha is a variation of the one between Satan and Sin in Book 2 of *Paradise Lost*. Their incestuous union gives birth to the monster, Death, whom Satan encounters at the Gates of Hell (Erdman 425; Damon 238). Leutha, as the female component of Satan's mentality, explains that it is she who urges Satan to assume Palamabron's work by effeminising Satan, in a desperate longing for Palamabron's love.

The Bard's Song ends after Leutha's confession and repentance, and her comforting settlement in "a New Space" created by Enitharmon to protect Satan from being punished. Leutha's lustful wish is later fulfilled when she is introduced into Palamabron's tent, where she gives birth to mentally split beings, with Death as one of them, echoing the episode in *Paradise Lost*. Leutha as the guilty substitute of Satan, as Johnson comments, is merely a parody of authentic atonement and self-sacrifice the image of the Lamb and Christ represent (241). The intricate, surreal, and sometimes ridiculous narrative of the Bard's Song presents a challenge for scholars who attempt to approach *Milton*. Although Blake makes it clear that Milton, motivated by hearing this Song, is determined to descend to the material world and rectify himself, it is almost inexplicable how the Palamabron-Satan brawl and Leutha's weird behaviours function in Milton's decision and the entire poem.

One of the most established interpretations is a biographical one. That is, the familial quarrel between Palamabron and Satan retells Blake's relationship with his patron and fellow poet William Hayley during his stay in Felpham from 1800 to 1804. Northrop Frye offers a convincing analysis of the cultural and aesthetic ideologies Hayley stood for and how they conflicted with Blake's visionary poetry and art. As a patron who expected to introduce

and promote artistic work to the public, Hayley acknowledged that he was responsible for directing Blake's "genius into socially acceptable channels" (*Fearful Symmetry* 328). To be social is to conform to norms and to be appealing to popular taste. Hayley insisted that Blake modify his works and urged him in a courteous and gentle manner that demonstrated his "sincere" care for the poet's welfare. Hence, Blake was caught in a painful dilemma between compromise (which would mar his artistic creation) and protest (which would lead to the accusation of ingratitude). Frye perceives Blake's real-life plight in the situation of Palamabron facing his brother, the "mild" and "soft" Satan, who is "[s]eeming a brother, being a tyrant" (7.22) and "do[es] unkind things in kindness! with power armd, to say / The most irritating things in the midst of tears and love" (12.32-33). The significance of the Palamabron-Satan brawl lies in its reflection of the enmity concealed in friendship and patronage that artists might encounter in their careers including Blake and Milton. Therefore, after hearing the Bard's Song, Milton comes to an epiphany that "I in my Selfhood am that Satan: I am that Evil One!" (14.30). He then realises that one of the ways to redeem himself is to annihilate his Satan-persona during his descent to the material world. In his *Prophet against Empire*, David V. Erdman provides another account for the Bard's Song by examining the contemporary political turmoil. As he observes, "the strife between Satan and Palamabron derives from the struggle between Cromwell and Parliament" (424). Satan's assumption of Palamabron's position alludes to Oliver Cromwell's rule in Parliament, and Palamabron's calling for a "Great Solemn Assembly" resonates with Parliament's operation. Erdman further suggests that Satan's declaration as God parallels Cromwell's and Napoleon's paths from revolutionary heroes to oppressive dictators. And Los's initial approval of Satan's action reflects that Milton and Blake himself support such a degenerating course at the very beginning. Frye's and Erdman's readings, through biographical and political perspectives respectively, both establish the fundamental interpretations of the Bard's Song.

There is, however, a critical deficit in the canonised readings of Frye

and Erdman. Both critics neglect Blake's deliberate feminisation of Satan that Leutha enigmatically executes in the poem. Damon detects undertones of homosexuality between the "mild" Satan and Palamabron. He takes this further by speculating that Hayley/Satan harbours homosexual desire for Blake, but he does not explicate this issue (Damon 238). James Reiger's essay "The Hem of Their Garments: The Bard's Song in Milton" is an extension of Frye's biographical analysis, as he argues that through the Bard's Song Blake proposes the expression of genuine emotions such as true wrath, pity, and love instead of "Satanic counterfeits" (271). In *Blake and Freud*, Diane Hume George argues that as a re-accounted role of Sin in *Paradise Lost*, Leutha represents a misdirected outcome of sexual desire, which is repressed and twisted by the sense of shame and guilt. According to George, Leutha, as the embodiment of sexual desire, is absolved and approved in *Milton*, rather than utterly condemned by Milton in *Paradise Lost* (163). But aside from this, she does not deal with Satan's effeminacy that Leutha incurs. Feminist critics such as Susan Fox and Anne K. Mellor, who aim to expose Blake's sexism and misogyny, generally focus on the status of Ololon, Milton's "Sixfold Emanation" at the end of Book 2. While arguing that Ololon is even a more submissive and meeker version of Eve in *Paradise Lost* (Fox 517; Mellor, "Blake's Portrayal of Women" 148), Fox and Mellor show little interest in Leutha's actions and Blake's design of Satan's feminisation. Following Fox and Mellor, Marc Kaplan's essay "Blake's *Milton*: The Metaphysics of Gender" maintains that Blake's "cosmos is not only gendered, but hierarchical and masculinist in character" (151). Although he does discuss the Bard's Song briefly, he merely interprets Satan's effeminacy as an example of masculinity that is contaminated by female propensities in Blake's works.

Later critics have explored the homosexual undertones in the Bard's Song more elaborately. Christopher Z. Hobson believes that Blake's poetic corpus evolves toward a positive embrace of "homosexual relations as nonpossessive and equalitarian, at least compared to the possessive, sexually rigid, hypocritical forms of heterosexuality" (*Blake and*

Homosexuality 3). Therefore, he argues that the negative portrayal of homosexual desire in Satan is in fact “a critique of the moral-sexual foundations” of “the English political-religious system after Milton” (80). It is also a reflection of the republican-protestant tradition which Milton belongs to, as Hobson proposes, that associates homosexuality (particularly in the derogatory term of “sodomy”) with aristocratic luxury and governmental corruption. Therefore, Leutha’s repentance of her arousing Satan’s “soft / Delusory love to Palamabron” (12.6-7) is nothing more than “self-accusation and acceptance of guilt” that “too often are components of same-sex subjectivity” (“Blake and the Evolution of Same-Sex Subjectivity” 30). Referring to Judith Butler’s idea of gender performativity, David Fallon highlights the gender fluidity in contemporary British society and Blake’s works. He argues against the previous feminist readings of oversimplified misogyny, elaborating that Blake’s negative presentations of women often emerge in the condition that female characters “assume conventionally public and ‘masculine’ attributes . . . when they transgress into transgender identities which trouble the pervasive norms of republican-political rhetoric” (187). Leutha’s effeminising influence upon Satan represents the social anxiety about this transgression of the barrier of gender roles.

In my own interpretation of the Bard’s Song, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, I read Satan’s feminisation, along with Blake’s several “obscene” visual designs of *Milton*, as a latent response to Burke’s conceptualisation of the sublime, which Blake dismisses with contempt. This alternative Blakean sublime, under the cover of his outright advocacy of “the Sublime of the Bible,” indicates the instability of gender roles that is evoked by the cultural phenomenon of effeminacy and its impact on aesthetic, political, and social conventions in contemporary British society. I would further demonstrate that the Bard’s Song and the visual designs of *Milton* epitomise the Romantic obscene that features the experience of self-annihilation of identities, social and biological. Blake’s idea of the sublime in *Milton* is manifested by the subversion of gender roles. This subversion is also connected with my formulation of the potential affinity between the

obscene and the sublime in the introduction, where I have demonstrated that in the division of the sublime and the beautiful exists a drastic shifting between active subject and passive object, as well as the inversion of power relationship between the dominant and the submissive.

Blake's direct response to Burke's treatise on the sublime can be found in his annotations to Joshua Reynolds's *Discourse VIII*. Here Blake aligns Burke with Locke and Newton, to whom he feels "the same Contempt & Abhorrence" because "They mock Inspiration & Vision" (CPPB 660). Blake rejects Burke's discourse because the latter values empirical experience that relies on human sensual faculties. To counter this, Blake declares his own definition of the sublime in his letter to Thomas Butts: "Allegory addressed to the Intellectual powers while it is altogether hidden from the Corporeal Understanding is My Definition of the Most Sublime Poetry" (CPPB 730). For Blake, although senses invoke imagination and nurture the "Poetic Genius," imagination cannot be confined by sensual perception of the exterior reality. Burke's aesthetics of the sublime and the beautiful is constructed solely on sensual observation of exterior objects and "pseudo-physiological explanation" (Paley 19). Therefore, his approach allies himself with Newton's mechanical and material account of the universe and Locke's "philosophy of five senses" (Damon 298), which allow no place for Blake's poetics of prophetic visions.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ There has been ample discussion about the Blakean sublime in preceding studies. Morton D. Paley, in *Energy and the Imagination* (1970), locates Blake's idea of the sublime in the eighteenth-century context, highlighting his similarities with contemporary thinkers such as John Dennis, Edward Young, Robert Lowth, and even Burke. Blake and his contemporaries have common notions of the sublime: "It is intense, suggestive of infinity, and productive of enthusiasm; it is associated with energy and is produced by contraries; it is, in its most powerful form, terrifying; and the chief source of it in literature is the Old Testament" (*Energy and the Imagination* 19). In *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (1976), Thomas Weiskel stresses Blake's critique of the Romantic sublime, paralleling his negative portrayal of Urizen's "solipsism and rational alienation of perception into mechanical regularity" with the Wordsworthian egotistic sublimation, "in which the formal properties of what is seen are dissolved and the residual otherness of the thing is alienated as indefinite substance" (68) and the Kantian "higher reason" of inscrutability and deprivation. Vincent de Luca's influential study *Words of Eternity: Blake and the Poetics of the Sublime* (1991) focuses on Blake's poetic style, with which the sublime effects are generated in "bardic" and "iconic" modes. De Luca discusses how the sublime in Blake's works achieves the "effects of flux, boundlessness, and indefinite extension" and transcends "temporality into a hard-edge 'now' of intellectual intensity" (6). Focusing on *The Four Zoas*, Peter Otto's 2000 study *Blake's Critique of Transcendence*:

Blake not only dismisses the epistemological basis of the Burkean sublime and beautiful. Specifically, he has different accounts of how the sublime works as an artistic phenomenon. In the Preface to Milton, Blake aspires to restore “the Sublime of the Bible,” while the Bible is also one of the examples of the sublime in Burke’s treatise. In the section where Burke proposes that “A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea” and “sublimity is principally due to the terrible uncertainty” (*Enquiry* 63), he refers to a passage from the Book of Job. In this passage, Eliphaz describes to Job a night vision in which the invisible presence of a spirit questions him in darkness on behalf of God: “Shall mortal man be more just than God?” (Job 4: 17). When Burke proceeds to discuss power and its sublime effects based on the uselessness in the human activities of work and production, he once again raises the examples of Leviathan and Behemoth from Job. On the surface, Burke is also promoting what Blake espouses as “the Sublime of the Bible.” But how do the two sorts of biblical sublime differ from each other? First, also in his annotations to Reynolds’s *Discourse VII*, Blake directly refutes the idea that obscurity is one of the elements of the sublime and denies it any aesthetic merits: “Obscurity is Neither the Source of the Sublime nor of any Thing Else” (*CPPB* 658).⁴¹ Second, Blake’s illustration of the same passage in Job that is quoted in *A Philosophical Enquiry* can be deemed a sharp counter-argument against the Burkean sublime reinforced

Love, Jealousy, and the Sublime in The Four Zoas proposes that the Blakean sublime means to direct human beings to corporeal reality rather than spiritual transcendence. With the multiple perspectives and voices in the poem, as Otto contends, Blake urges the reader to be aware of the reality as “a dismembered communal form” and its “traumatic ‘real’ that is the foundation for everyday life and yet is disguised by it” (34). The most recent criticism on the Blakean sublime includes Steven Vine’s “Blake’s Material Sublime” (2002) and Daniel Schierenbeck’s “‘Sublime Labours’: Aesthetics and Political Economy in Blake’s *Jerusalem*” (2007). Vine examines the material aspects of Blake’s works, arguing that “The infinite resides in the corrosion and ‘melting away’ of the material, but this process is internal to the material itself. The material is not so much sublimated as the sublime is installed in the material” (242). Situating the Blakean sublime in the scope of political economy, Schierenbeck demonstrates that in *Jerusalem*, “Blake valorizes the sublime and connects it with labor,” “denigrates the delusive repose of the beautiful”, and “uses these images to critique the idea of the division of the labor” (23).

⁴¹ Although in his 1799 letter to Dr. Trusler Blake claims that “What is Grand is necessarily obscure to Weak men. That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care. The wisest of the Ancients considered what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction because it rouzes the faculties to act” (*CPPB* 702), we should note that for Blake, the sublime is only “obscure” when perceived by “Weak men.”

by obscurity and against Burke's understanding of the Bible. Blake's design of "The Vision of Eliphaz" from the illustrations of the Book of Job, produced around 1806, shows Eliphaz lying in bed and seeing in astonishment a spirit that descends upon him (see Figure 5 on page 109). His hairs stand up, visualising the biblical lines: "Then a spirit passed before my face; the hair of my flesh stood up" (Job 4: 15). But the figure of the spirit is far from obscure, as he manifests himself in dazzling brightness and his contour is delineated in explicit clarity. Blake's portrayal of the spirit as a bearded old man tells us that he is more than a representative of the divine will but Jehovah himself. His folded arms and wrathful eye convey the ideas of admonishment and punishment. Another similar design of night vision in this set of illustrations is "Job's Evil Dream," which depicts the leprosy-stricken Job lying in bed (see Figure 6 on page 110). A nightmare vision afflicts Job, which diverts significantly from the biblical section it refers to: "Then thou scarest me with dreams, and terrifiest me through visions" (Job 7: 14). In this design, the spirit hidden in darkness is no longer obscure. The spirit appears as Jehovah himself, pressing himself maliciously on Job, who powerlessly resists with his forking arms and turning head—an almost feminine posture. This figure of Jehovah is an obvious image of Urizen/Satan, an identification revealed in Plate 9 of *Milton*.⁴² Every curving lines on his beard, sinews of his muscle, every piece of scale of the entwining serpent, and the Hebrew letters in the Ten Commandments are all displayed in clarity. Blake's design is sublime in terms of the terror it evokes, but obscurity has no place here. The intense effect is generated by the overwhelming threat posed by Jehovah and the wretchedness of Job as an annihilated spectator of the former's sublime terror. The image might also remind us of the erotic nightmare brought by incubuses, a frequent theme of Gothic art that appears most famously in Henry Fuseli's painting. The power relationship between the figures of Jehovah and Job also has an undertone of homosexual rape. In this illustration, Blake transcends the empirical perception of the original words

⁴² In the Assembly called by Palamabron, Satan "created Seven deadly Sins drawing out his infernal scroll, / Of Moral Laws and cruel punishments upon the clouds of Jehovah" (9.21-22), declaring "I am God alone / There is no other!" (9.25-26).

from the Scripture with his imagination. The Blakean sublime here is accomplished through a detailed manifestation of evil and its succumbing victim in utmost clarity and, as Blake himself puts it, in “determinate and bounding form” (*CPPB* 550). This representation corresponds to the obscene aesthetics I formulate in relation to the sublime in my introduction. The human-formed sublime, which consists of a dominant powerful figure and a submissive and powerless one, can also be observed in several visual designs of *Milton*.

The first one we encounter is Plate 16. It is a full-page design that shows the struggle between Milton and Urizen with a caption: “To annihilate the Self-hood of Deceit & False Forgiveness” (*CPPB* 807, see Figure 7 on page 111). The context of this image is Milton’s painful epiphany of realising that Satan as Jehovah/Urizen, the sky-god of Moral laws, has been part of his own psyche. Thus, he strives to remove this evil portion in his self. This endeavour is implied by his right foot that breaks the word “Self-hood” in half—a gesture similar to the one in the Frontispiece, where Milton’s rising arm breaks his own name apart. On Plate 16, Milton in his muscular form strides towards Urizen, who spreads open his four limbs with a facial expression of woe and erotic ecstasy that resembles Job’s in “Job’s Evil Dream.” Milton seizes Urizen with his arms around the latter’s neck, as if in a murderous action of strangulation. The overlapped positions of their lower bodies engender erotic undertones of homosexuality. Blake here subverts Jehovah/Urizen’s original character as an oppressive violator, presenting him in a powerless posture that passively receives sexual violence. This design does not conform to Christopher Hobson’s assertion that the homosexual images in *Milton* invoke “qualities of fraternity, mutual support, and moral heroism” (*Blake and Homosexuality* 132). With this design, Blake suggests that the revolution against tyranny is not only a “Mental Fight” against the Urizenic portion in one’s mentality, but also a process of self-annihilation in the form of sexual violence that combines terror and orgasmic ecstasy. Once again, bodily sex is synthesised with Blake’s Christian revisionism, which recapitulates his idea that sacredness is accessed through eroticism that

drastically alter human subjectivity and selfhood.

Other two examples of Blake's "obscene sublimity" are the full-page illustration of the lines from Plate 22: "And Los behind me stood; a terrible flaming Sun: just close / Behind my back; I turned round in terror, and behold" (22.6-7), and the full-page design of Plate 39: "Urizen faints in terror striving among the Books of Arnon / With Miltons Spirit" (39.53-54). Both visual images feature two male figures of straight/high and bending/low postures respectively. Some critics have noticed the possible action of homosexual fellatio in this arrangement (Essick and Viscomi 33; *Blake and Homosexuality* 133; Woodman 84; Sha 203). The first design depicts Los standing in the flaming sun, his head leaning upon the left hand and his legs spreading open (see Figure 8 on page 112). The figure of Blake himself squats with his legs forming a twisted triangle that resembles Bromion's and Theotormon's orgasmic postures in *Visions*. He turns his head backward and upward, positioned right at the pubic area of Los. In this crucial moment of inspiration when Los "kissed me and wishd me health. / And I became One Man with him arising in my strength" (22.11-12), Blake once again demonstrates with this visual design that the aesthetic experience of "Poetic Genius" is in essence an erotic experience. Particularly, this erotic experience is different from the unilateral sex confined in heteronormativity. The second full-page design of Plate 39 shows a gender-ambiguous figure with long hair and in white robe swooning on the standing naked Milton (see Figure 9 on page 113). This depiction can be regarded as the result of the struggle on Plate 16 (*Blake and Homosexuality* 139). In this design, Urizen surrenders to Milton and puts his head at the latter's pubic area, though the implication of oral sex here is not as strong and obvious as the Los-Blake plate.

In the illustrations of the Book of Job and the designs of *Milton*, Blake demonstrates "the Sublime of the Bible" with the homoerotic interaction and power relationship between the dominant and the submissive. Homosexuality in Blake's time was generally considered scandalous and obscene, and in legal terms was criminalised as sodomy. Randolph Trumbach's research

shows that from the eighteenth century to the first half of the nineteenth century, there were more men sentenced to death for sodomy than in the past six hundred years in Holland and England (“Sodomitical Assaults” 408). However, there were some nuances in what constituted the obscenity of sodomy. The archetype of libertine from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, whose image is partly inspired by Renaissance Humanist self-sufficiency and erudition, is often depicted as bisexual: “with a whore on one arm and a boy on the other” (“Sodomy Transformed” 111). Thus, according to Trumbach, adult males who followed the archetype of libertine by seducing adolescents are scandalous but in a somewhat seductive and charismatic way. In this homosexual relationship, these men still play the conventional active role in control of their young victims, who are regarded as feminine because of their state of pre-puberty. Their young victims’ unique innocence and gender ambiguity also constitute an alternative taste of refinement and delicacy.⁴³ The moral condemnation, therefore, is not against the active men in a homosexual relationship, but is hurled on “the effeminate sodomite” or “molly,” an “adult man who was effeminate in speech, gesture, and dress, and who was really half man, half woman” (“Sodomy Transformed” 106). The dichotomy between masculinity and femininity in the eighteenth century is also embedded in political ideologies. In *The Independent Man*, Matthew McCormack examines the sexualised rhetoric of politics in the Georgian England. His research demonstrates that an idealised citizenship relies on its quality of independence—a synthesis of physical strength, familial value based on fatherhood, civic Humanism, and classical republicanism. Such a masculine quality is actualised by patriotism, devotion to public issues, and resistance to aristocratic culture of luxury, in strong contrast to the negative effeminate image of un-Englishness (especially French), passivity, delicacy, and decadence (McCormack 104-139). The combination of political

⁴³ Richard Sha surveys eighteenth-century anatomical treatises by John Hunter, whose works were known to Blake as he appears as a character in the latter’s *An Island in the Moon* (Damon 199), and Andrew Bell. His study shows that in contemporary biological thinking, before puberty (legally fourteen in male and twelve in female) there is only one sex which is feminine, and after puberty the secondary sexual differentiation emerges to bring forth masculine features for boys (Sha 107-124).

ideologies and gender roles, which is highly associated with national identity, reinforces the sense of otherness, alienation, and obscenity in those who transgress the gender boundary.

In Blake's illustrations and designs of homoeroticism, we can find clues of feminisation that constitutes the sense of obscene passivity in "effeminate sodomites" in the eighteenth-century British society. In "Job's Evil Dreams," Job's gesture of powerless resistance against violation and his trancelike facial expression put him in the female position that resembles Fuseli's "The Nightmare," in which the woman's dream is also intruded by a ghost-like horse and a vicious incubus in a highly erotic manner. Job, a hero that represents utmost faith in God and perseverance against suffering in Christian tradition, is recast by Blake as a feminised victim ravished by his beloved God. In the illustration of Plate 39 of *Milton*, Milton holds the collapsing Urizen, who is also depicted with feminised traits; his clearly thinner waist, rather tender bodily contour, and his white robe are all in contrast with Milton's upright and muscular masculinity. In the illustration of Plate 22, Blake's own figure is also imbued with gender ambiguity. The act of fellatio emphasises the power positions in sexual interaction, as in cases of contemporary sodomy, oral sex was more often performed by the effeminate and passive adolescents on their adult and masculine partners. Also, Blake's portrayal of himself, as Hobson also perceives, show "no genitals or with female genitals, as some faint lines in the position of labia suggest" (135). Morton D. Paley is right in pointing out that Blake differs from other contemporary theorists on the sublime by "locating the sublime in the energies of humanity itself, and so making it part of his dialectic of liberation" (*Energy and Imagination* 24). But aside from the positive aspiration for liberation, Blake's "sublimity of the human body" also insinuates the negativity and "obscenity" of identity subversion. Blake's deliberate depictions of homosexuality and effeminate male bodies in these designs of "the Sublime of the Bible" reflect the concept of obscenity not with male-to-male sex itself, but with the subversion of contemporary gender roles: the degradation of masculinity. Blake makes such transsexuality an essential

component in the experiences of religious vision, mental struggles against a fallen self, and poetic inspiration. Apart from these visual images, Blake's text in the Bard's Song in Book I of *Milton* also displays this unique obscene sublimity of transsexuality.

Milton's errors in *Paradise Lost* include giving Satan the poetic energy and making him the revolutionary hero of sexual liberation against political and religious oppressions, represented by Angel and God, about whom Milton "wrote in fetters" (CPPB 35). Therefore, one of Blake's major tasks in composing *Milton* is to restore Satan and God to their rightful places. This task is contained in Blake's endeavour to promote "the Sublime of the Bible," declared in the Preface. The proper poetic presentation of the biblical sublime is one of the central concerns of Blake's revisionism in *Milton*, and once again he engages Burke's influential discourse in terms of the characterisation of Satan. In *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke refers to Milton's portrayal of Satan in Book 1 of *Paradise Lost* in the section about obscurity. Milton's Satan displays "excess / Of glory obscured: as when the sun new ris'n / Looks through the horizontal misty air" (*Paradise Lost* 1.593-594) and exemplifies Burke's point that "It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions" (*Enquiry* 61). In *Milton*, on the contrary, Satan appears "with incomparable mildness" and "most endearing love" (7.4-5). During his struggle with Los and Palamabron, Blake's description of him is filled with the word "mild," and its variants such as "mildly," "mildest," and "mildness." And tears are Satan's most frequent accompaniment of argument, as we see "Satan wept, / And mildly cursing Palamabron" (7.33-34) and "back return'd to Los, not fill'd with vengeance but with tears" (8.6). In addition to recording his personal fight with Hayley in an allegorical manner, Blake recasts Satan, the archetypal demon, to the position of villain by depriving him of all masculine qualities. With his "youth and beauty" and mild manners, Satan is no longer a spectacle of the sublime for readers to behold in awe and fear, but is virtually closer to Burke's description of the beautiful: "For sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small; beauty should be smooth, and polished;

the great, rugged and negligent" (*Enquiry* 124). Burke's division of the sublime the beautiful, as discussed in the introduction, reflects the fixed characteristics of gender roles in the eighteenth-century society. Considering aesthetic value, he obviously holds higher esteem of the sublime than the beautiful. Blake deliberately conforms to Burke's division and evaluation of the two kinds of aesthetics and categorise Satan into the lower one. Furthermore, he enhances Satan's femininity by juxtaposing it with masculine sublimity of natural terror and human sacrifice (represented by Meloch's fires) in the subsequent lines: "They [the Genii of Satan's Mills] Plow'd in tears! incessant pour'd Jehovahs rain, & Molechs / Thick fires contending with the rain thunder'd above rolling / Terrible over their heads; Satan wept over Palamabron" (8.27-29).

In her crucial confession before the Great Solemn Assembly, Leutha admits that she enters Satan's mentality every night and

Like sweet perfumes I stupefied the masculine perceptions
And kept only the feminine awake. hence rose his soft
Delusory love to Palamabron: admiration join'd with envy
Cupidity unconquerable! (12.5-8)

From one perspective, Blake's characterisation of Leutha's origin from "Satans inmost Palace of his nervous fine wrought Brain" (12.41) derives from the birth of her counterpart, Sin, in *Paradise Lost*. Blake's description of Luetha's birth—"back the Gnomes recoil'd / And call'd me Sin, and for a sign portentous held me" (12.39-41)—is almost identical to Milton's: "Back they recoiled afraid / At first and called me 'Sin' and for a sign / Portentous held me" (*Paradise Lost* 2.759-761). However, Leutha in *Milton* is no longer the she-monster, "Voluminous and vast, a serpent armed / With mortal sting" (*Paradise Lost* 2.652-653), whose womb is ceaselessly gnawed by her own deformed children—an incestuous rape that parallels her relationship with Satan. As George points out, Leutha's repentance indicates that "Women in Blake are often more flexible than men . . . quicker to see their mistakes and to work to redeem themselves" (163). Leutha's plea is accepted by the Great Solemn Assembly and her sin is exonerated, unlike her counterpart in *Paradise Lost*, who follows Satan to his unredeemable downfall. Although

Leutha does bring forth a child also named Death, he is a “shadowy Spectre of Sleep” in Beulah, which is the realm of dream and subconscious that symbolises temporary repose (Damon 43). He does not suffer the same fate as his monstrous and incestuous counterpart in *Paradise Lost*, who is in “The other shape / . . . stood as night, / Fierce as ten furies, terrible as Hell / And shook a dreadful dart” (2.666, 670-672). Burke regards Death’s terror of obscurity in these lines as highly sublime (*Enquiry* 59), but it is neutralised and diminished by Blake in *Milton*. The characterisation of Leutha, as George also observes, might suggest that Blake is more forgiving to the female errors, in contrast to Milton, who “rigidly rejected the redemptive aspect of the feminine, even though he tried to include it in *Paradise Lost*” (163).

However, from another perspective free from the Miltonic allusions, despite emerging as an independent character, Leutha in Blake’s mythical system is only an “Emanation,” the female aspect, of Satan. Blake considers the unfallen “human form divine” primarily androgynous in mentality. However, this harmonious state is not of gender equality, but is dominated by its male aspect, as Mellor and Susan Fox have underlined and criticised. As an overstepping female aspect, Leutha usurps the male dominance in Satan’s mind and generates his “Delusory love to Palamabron.” This design again reflects the contemporary idea of homosexuality as a result of the breakdown of masculine identity. Such a breakdown makes a man succumb to the unconventional desire of playing an effeminate role in his sexual psyche and his relationship with others. Therefore, though Hobson maintains that Leutha’s guilt is driven by a sense of shame and fear for sexual desire in a more general sense that Blake intends to criticise, and that Blake harbours a more positive attitude to homosexual love, it is still perceivable that for Blake, the subversion of conventional gender roles of masculinity and femininity, such as Satan’s feminisation, causes chaos that is almost beyond redemption.

The Bard’s Song brings Milton a painful epiphany that “I in my Selfhood am that Satan: I am that Evil One!” (14.30). It inspires him to annihilate this Satanic portion in his mentality by descending to the material world and

reunite with his Sixfold Emanation (his three wives and three daughters) embodied by Ololon, a twelve-year-old virgin. In *Milton*, Blake shows his righteous goal to emancipate Milton (and himself) from Satan's hypocrisy—"Seeming a brother, being a tyrant, even thinking himself a brother / While he is murdering the just" (7.22-23)—that symbolises patronage's harmful effects on artistic creation. However, he inevitably manipulates the gender stereotypes of femininity, which is obscene if it emerges in men, as a crucial component of that hypocrisy. And Milton's lofty self-annihilation entails his removal of this Satanic feminine propensity, reinforcing his patriarchal stability in his later reunion with Ololon. In her first appearance, Ololon prostrates before Milton, "asking with tears forgiveness / Confessing their crime with humiliation and sorrow" (35.32-33), and throws herself "[i]nto the Fires of Intellect" to unite with him (42.9). Ololon's first action recreates the action of Milton's first wife, Mary Powell, who begged forgiveness after she ran away because of (as Milton perceived) her lack of interest and intellectual capacity in appreciating and participating in her husband's works.⁴⁴ Her second action into "the Fires of Intellect" can be interpreted as her elevation to the poetic inspiration of her husband, but it might also be read as she succumbing again to the male superiority of a national bard—a downright masculine image who "in terrible majesty" says to Ololon: "Obey thou the Words of the Inspired Man" (40.29).

Blake's casting of Ololon as "a Virgin of twelve years" also draws critical attention. Damon and George both regard "twelve years" as a sign of puberty, which means she is capable of sexual experience and procreation (Damon 279; George 175; Essick and Viscomi 196). Paley provides a new explanation that Blake draws the idea from the apocryphal *Protoevangelium Jacobi*, modelling Ololon on Virgin Mary in her youth. Virginity is hardly a virtue that Blake espouses, for it is cherished and kept by religious doctrines

⁴⁴ In *The Early Lives of Milton*, Helen Darbishire records the reconciliation between Milton and Mary: "the Wife was ready in another Room, and on a sudden he was surprised to see one whom he thought to have never seen more, making Submission and begging Pardon on her Knees before him; he might probably at first make some shew of aversion and rejection; but partly his own generous nature, more inclinable to Reconciliation than to perseverance in Anger and Revenge" (66-67).

of repression, resulting in “the rewards of continence” and “The self enjoyings of self denial” (*Visions* 7.8-9). Blake’s characterisation of Ololon as a twelve-year-old virgin insinuates an erotic (or pornographic in a modern understanding) sense that emphasises both her sexual innocence and her potential to receive male desire. In other words, “twelve-year-old virginity” is a state more than suitable for Milton to take advantage of in his attempt to reincorporate her into his poetical/sexual enterprise. Hence, it is understandable that Blake is more vulnerable to feminist criticism in his later works such as *Milton*, as he moves towards a more conservative position in his later career, in regard of gender roles and their supposed qualities that are regulated by social conventions.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how Blake’s poetic rendering of erotic images correspond to the idea of obscenity as an aesthetic phenomenon of self-annihilation of identities, social and biological. In “I saw a chapel all of gold” the images of the vomiting serpent and the swine-consorting speaker signify the essential experience of the sacred accessed through transgression and erotic ecstasy instead of purity and wholeness. In *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Blake draws from the biological and philosophical discourses from his contemporaries such as Erasmus Darwin, Samuel-Auguste Tissot, and Jacques Rousseau, presenting heterogeneous sexual orientations that subvert the social identities confined in monogamous marriage. At last, in his later epic attempt to rectify his greatest precursor, we find the Blakean obscene engaging the Burkean sublime, extending the breakdown of self and identity to the more essentialist category of gender roles. The text and visual designs in *Milton: a Poem*, along with his illustrations of the Book of Job, though inevitably promoting a more conservative attitude toward femininity, still demonstrate the degradation of masculinity and potential transsexuality. The sexual dynamics in this self-annihilating subversion conveys what Richard Sha terms as “an eroticized aesthetics” of the Romantic sublimity, in which “the rapture of erotic pleasure takes the self outside of cognition, and breaks it into fragments” (154). The next chapter will further explore this obscene aesthetics in the works of Percy

Bysshe Shelley: *The Cenci* and *Laon and Cythna*.



Figure 5. "The Vision of Eliphaz." *Illustrations to the Book of Job*, 1821
(Morgan Library and Museum)



Figure 6. "Job's Evil Dream." *Illustrations of the Book of Job*, 1821
(Morgan Library and Museum)



Figure 7. Plate 16, *Milton: a Poem*, Copy A, 1811 (British Museum)



Figure 8. Illustration of Plate 22, *Milton: a Poem*, Copy A, 1811 (British Museum)

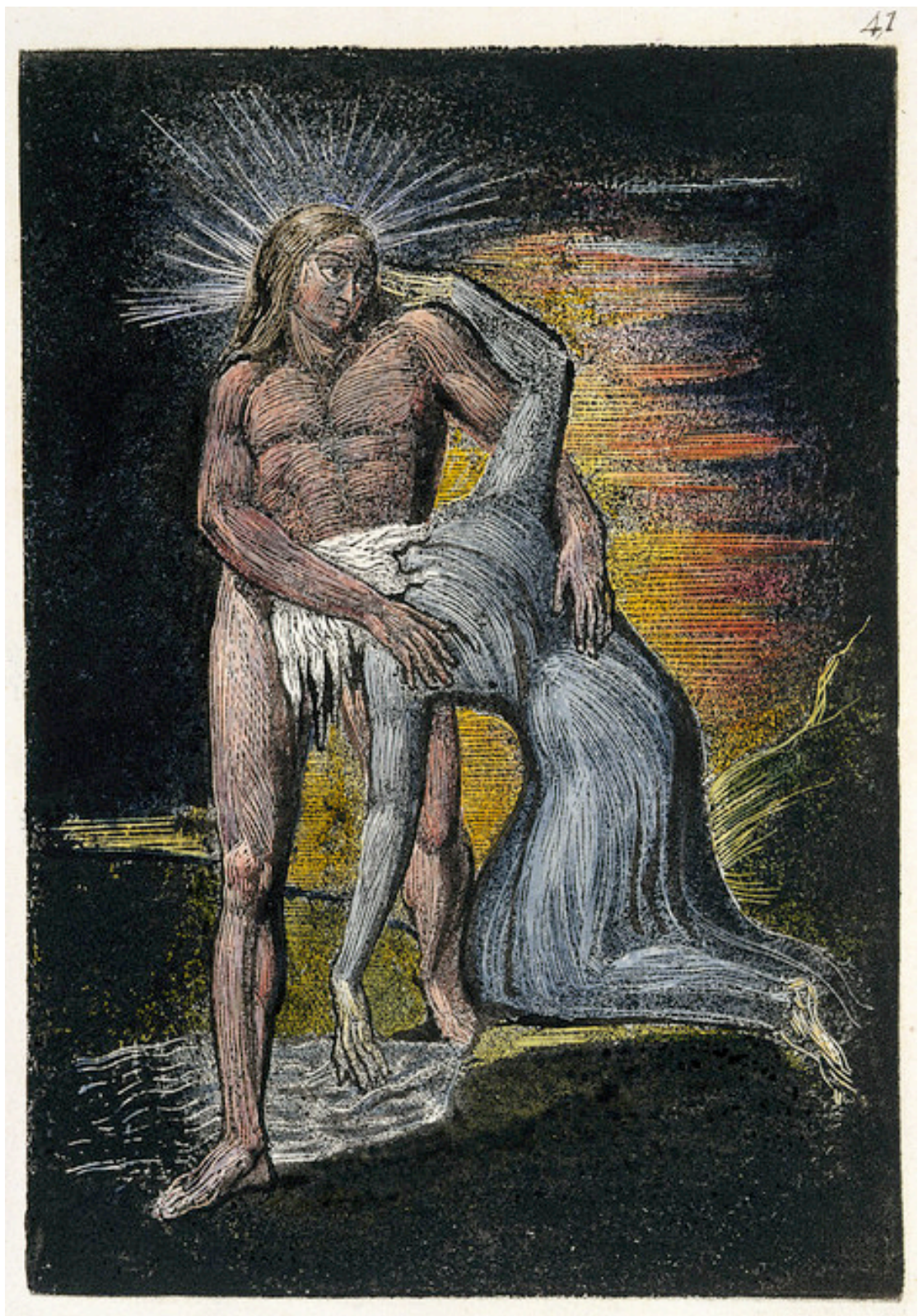


Figure 9. Illustration of Plate 39, *Milton: a Poem*, Copy A, 1811 (British Musuem)

CHAPTER 2

Percy Bysshe Shelley: Incest, Suffering, and Madness

INTRODUCTION: THE RECONCILIATION OF THE TWO DRIVES IN *A DEFENCE OF POETRY*

Among the Romantics examined in this research, Shelley is the only one who gives a specific account of the idea of obscenity as certain representations in literary works. In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley laments that tragedy in his age has become “a weak attempt to teach certain doctrines . . . which are usually no more than specious flatteries of some gross vice” and “hymns to the triumph of kingly power over liberty and virtue” (MW 685).⁴⁵ Following this complaint, he observes that, in contemporary comedy, “obscenity” is a crucial element of degradation, a “blasphemy against the divine beauty in life” (685). Shelley’s definition of the obscene is closely connected with his consideration of poetry as a positive drive in society. At a deeper level, Shelley’s understanding of the obscene is inextricably linked with his idea of the essence of poetry. The re-visitation of the *Defence* that I offer here will uncover what is hidden behind Shelley’s dismissal of the obscene as both a decadent form of artistic representation and that which is in utter opposition to poetry. Shelley’s dismissal resonates with the eighteenth-century juxtaposition of the obscene and the sublime as polarised aesthetics, but it also connotes an actual affinity with my formulation of “the obscene” as a heterogeneous aesthetic phenomenon. I have already demonstrated this formulation in my reading of Blake. “The obscene” as a heterogeneous aesthetic phenomenon can also be explored in Shelley’s *The Cenci* and *Laon and Cythna*, as this chapter will demonstrate.

Shelley opens the *Defence* by addressing the division between reason and imagination, a demarcation that seems common in the Romantic context as a Wordsworthian espousal of poetry as “spontaneous overflow of powerful

⁴⁵ All quotations from *A Defence of Poetry* and *The Cenci* are from *The Major Works* (Oxford UP, 2009) edited by Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill, hereafter referred to as *MW*. Quotations from *Laon and Cythna* and other poetics works are from *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Clarendon, 1975) edited by Neville Rogers.

feelings” against the Neo-classicist rationalism and formality. Shelley uses two Greek words to describe these “two classes of mental action” (MW 674): *τό λογίζειν* (reasoning) and *τό ποιεῖν* (making). Paralleling Nietzsche’s formulation, the former is Apollonian; it represents the “principle of analysis and its action regards the relations of things.” The latter is Dionysian; it epitomises the “principle of synthesis; and has for its objects those forms which are common to universal nature and existence itself” (674). The disparity between reason and imagination that Shelley proposes in the *Defence* is not limited to the conflict between sensuality (or passion) and rationalism, but is instead concerned more broadly the essential human faculty of perception—with the ability to distinguish an object from another and to establish an identity by differentiating self from others. Reason, for Shelley, is a means to construct boundaries for individuals that “respect differences.” Shelley’s idea predates his contemporary Arthur Schopenhauer’s concept of *principium individuationis*, that is, the “principle of individuation,” which, Nietzsche maintains is best embodied in the Apollonian art of sculpture—the art of delineation that highlights proportion and restraint. Imagination, on the contrary, is about seeing “the similitude of things;” thus, it is a means to annihilate the boundary between self and others. As Kathleen Wheeler’s study has foregrounded the similarity between Shelley’s idea of poetry and Nietzsche’s construal of philosophy and truth, I would further highlight their similar understandings of artistic imagination.⁴⁶ To some

⁴⁶ In *Romanticism, Pragmatism and Deconstruction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), Wheeler argues that in writing poetry, Shelley regards “metaphor as the vehicle for knowledge” and rejects “earlier accounts of imagination as a merely expressive or representative faculty or already constituted perceptions (8). On the contrary, in the process of imagining “a unity is created which releases new and previously unimagined relations”; moreover, in this process, and knowledge “is continuously expanding and rearranging itself as central elements are pushed to the periphery, while previously periphery unknown elements becomes centres and foci of knowledge” (8). Nietzsche’s philosophical writing corresponds to this process of imagination. His aphoristic style is based on metaphorical mechanism and renounces “the notion of systems of thought and logical chains of reasoning, substituting instead rhetorical, figurative, metaphoric language, accompanied by sharp, stimulating, and disturbing jabs at the reader” (16). According to Wheeler, Nietzsche’s concept of knowledge and truth not as an immovable thing-in-itself but as “a process of incessant appropriation, figuration, deciphering, or interpretation” (19) also parallels Shelley’s understanding of knowledge and the universe as “genuinely organic, in the sense of continuously evolving in unpredictable and unimaginable ways” with “indeterminate growth and transformation as a major character of existence” (5).

extent, Shelley's perception of imagination resembles what Nietzsche describes in *The Birth of Tragedy* as Dionysian intoxication, a state of ecstasy in which the ability to recognise differences between self and other is disabled, and in which "the gulfs between man and man give to an overwhelming feeling of unity leading back to the very heart of nature" (Nietzsche 59).

As a Romantic poet, Shelley elevates imagination over reason: "Reason is to Imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance." He adds that "Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be 'the expression of the Imagination'" (MW 675). As Wheeler also observes, Shelley "saw imagination not as the special province of the artist but as the paradigmatic form of all human mental activity" (4). Wheeler complements this with the note that, for Shelley, it is "the poet and poetry which lead to truth and knowledge, by means of the synthetic power of imagination (as opposed to the merely analytical understanding) and its vehicle, metaphor" (4). However, the question inferred from this evaluation and its connection with the Greek division between the Apollonian *τό λογικεῖν* and Dionysian *τό ποιεῖν* is: How does Shelley deal with the potential threat of self-annihilation and identity loss in the operation of imagination?⁴⁷ After constructing poetry's formulation as a three-stage process of human mentality—existence, perception, and expression—in which a certain sense of eternal harmony and beauty reigns over temporary discordance, Shelley announces his attempt to "estimate its effects upon society" (MW 680). In the ancient times, as Shelley maintains, poetry is tinged with a certain religiosity that transcends the mundane world: "it acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness" (680). Shelley extends his previous idea of imagination as a human drive

⁴⁷ This is also a danger foreseen long ago by Plato in *Ion* as the premise of artistic inspiration. In the dialogue between Socrates and Ion, Plato proposes, through Socrates, that poets create their work "because they are inspired and possessed" and because "they are not in their right mind"; a poet "cannot compose until he is possessed and out of his mind, and his reason is no longer in him" (5). This discourse aims to devalue poetry as something created not by real "skill or art" but rather by an irrational fancy that alienates itself farther from the primary metaphysical truth.

regardless of reason's function of differentiation by arguing that the divine quality of poetry goes beyond consciousness. Conjuring an image of the poet as a nightingale in darkness, he illustrates that the poet's "auditors" are "entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why" (680). If we carefully observe Shelley's word choices in this account, we can discern that poetry stands for an alternative realm to that material world that is perceptible to the human senses. Poetry's origin of pleasure is unknown and cannot be named, which means it has transcended the epistemological order of human knowledge and is not controlled by the power of interpretation. This construal of the poetic imagination resonates with William Hazlitt's anti-epistemological notion of poetry in "On Poetry in General," in which he holds that "The province of the imagination is principally visionary, the unknown and undefined," adding, "It is the undefined and uncommon that gives birth and scope to the imagination; we can only fancy what we do not know" (*Selected Writings* 318). In other words, the state of appreciating poetry is a sort of "trance," "transport," and "fancy" in which pre-existing identities are dissolved and forgotten. This is one of the key elements in the sphere of Nietzsche's Dionysian intoxication, Bataille's *l'érotisme sacré*, and the self-shattering obscenity. For Shelley, if poetry is based on this mysterious state of unearthliness and self-oblivion—a state that resonates with "the obscene" phenomenon observed in the eighteenth-century theological documents—how does it positively affect human society? Or, in Shelley's own words, how does it "contribute to the happiness and perfection of man" (683)?

For Shelley, the key to harnessing the dangerous state of imagination that borders on chaos is morality, a word, which, in its conventional sense, is perhaps incompatible with the very tenet of Romantic poetry, as we see Blake's constant attacks on "Moral Laws" that represent both political and religious oppressions. Undoubtedly, Shelley has his own interpretation of true morality against the conventional moral doctrines that are in fact "specious flatteries of some gross vice" (*MW* 685). As he illustrates in the *Defence*, a poet cannot directly preach what is morally right and what is not. If he does

so, he is imitating the tyrannical Jehovah who decrees the Ten Commandments. Moreover, for Shelley, it is a misunderstanding that the primary aim of poetry is to “produce the moral improvement of man” (681). Instead of moral doctrines and social conventions, Shelley’s cosmological system has concealed in it an ultimate phenomenon of truth and beauty that can only be unveiled through poetry. The perception of such a phenomenon is processed by the human’s “a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought” to make “familiar objects be as if they were not familiar” (681). In Shelley’s view, beauty, in addition to being manifested in natural grandeur, is demonstrated within the positive interaction among human beings. That interaction, as Shelley maintains, is the “great secret of morals”—“Love” (682).

Love, for Shelley, is a possible solution to the problematic loss of self in the operation of imagination, which tends to dissolve the boundary between self and others established by reason. Shelley deems the breakdown of the boundary to be the origin of sympathy. That is, he believes that through imagination we execute “a going out of our own nature,” and that by annihilating self and pre-existing identity we can identify with others around us. This is because, for “[a] man to be greatly good,” he “must put himself in the place of another and many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own” (682).⁴⁸ Such is the “therapeutic” drive in English Romanticism, especially in Shelley’s works: to “heal the division between mind and world, subject and object, citizen and the state, that the radical Enlightenment had forced open (Roberts 50). Hugh Roberts further postulates that for Shelley, “by expanding our identity to the circumference of the circle we (therapeutically) dilate our being to a heightened self-consciousness; the individual self-consciousness is merely the self-conscious moment of an integral larger whole, ranging, in Shelley’s imagery, from a pair of friends and lovers, through the state, to, at least in glimpses,

⁴⁸ Adam Smith, in Part 1 of his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, also emphasises the significant role of imagination in the operation of sympathy: “Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations” (11).

the Absolute" (110). In the face of human suffering, Shelley's account of sympathy differs from Burke, who believes that God gives human beings pleasure in viewing others' misery in order to prevent them from shunning the misery and also to impede the disintegration of society. For Burke, the function of sympathy is to secure social harmony and political stability, which denotes his conservatism and pragmatism. For Shelley, sympathy is not decreed by God, but is rather an inherent human emotion that is evoked by imagination. Moreover, sympathy is freed from external rules; that is, human beings show sympathy to others because it is their nature to love and to pity, not because certain social norms command them to. Shelleyan sympathy, as Roberts argues, also stems from the "therapeutic" drive to extend selfhood to encompass the external world and to reunify subject and object, whose division is caused by the Enlightenment rationalism.⁴⁹ Also, Shelley's emphasis on positive affections as an innate human quality rather than as constituted by external orders resounds with Blake's religious ideal of inner divinity—the "human form divine"—against an exterior Urizenic sky-god, because "All deities reside in the human breast" (*CPPB* 38).

In both "On Love" and the *Defence*, we can notice Shelley's endeavours to internalise morality as "Love" and to connect it to artistic imagination, the basis of poetical creation. Furthermore, he attempts to render this "internal goodness" and poetical beauty responsive to the hidden divinity of harmony in his cosmological order, which, as he aspires, is an ideal replacement of the despotic God worshipped in institutionalised Christianity. In short, Shelley aims to contain the negativity of self-oblivion and self-annihilation in poetic imagination. In addition, he strives to neutralise the potential danger for lunacy and chaos in the poetic imagination by arguing for love and sympathy as the essential components of poetry. He synthesises such a formulation of poetry with his conception of the world, or his view of secular religiosity and politics. Through poetry, human beings can

⁴⁹ As Roberts postulates, "the core of the Enlightenment project as the theoretical or analytical 'separation,'" whose origin lies in Descartes's idea of "disengaged subject" that "initiates the divorce between mind and world, individual and 'tradition,' subject and object" (33).

reflect in their hearts “only the forms of purity and brightness,” an inner “Paradise which pain and sorrow and evil dare not overleap” (“On Love” *MW* 632). Through poetry, Shelley aspires to realise this inner Paradise in the material world, which he believes ought to evolve continuously towards perfection—towards a prophesied realm of love, freedom, and equality. This is an ideology shared by William Godwin in *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, who likewise proposes a “state of perpetual progress” (104) and argues that the evil of humanity lies in “supposing a change impracticable, and not incessantly looking forward to its accomplishment” (47). In the *Defence*, to reinforce his synthesis of love/sympathy, poetry, and an ideal society, Shelley assiduously emphasises the positive aspect of creating and appreciating poetry: “beauty,” “pleasure,” “happiness,” and “delight.” The frequency with which he repeats these words lends the work an exhortative tone. And yet, his repetitive affirmation of poetry’s positive social effects paradoxically reflects his awareness of and anxiety about poetry’s darker side. Indeed, this is first implied at the beginning of the *Defence* when he presents his idea of imagination as a boundary-dissolving and self-annihilating drive. He then constantly indicates the same in his accounts of poetry as an entity that transcends will and consciousness: “Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will . . . the conscious portions of our nature are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure” (*MW* 696-697).

Thus, the *Defence* essentially reveals Shelley’s struggle to reconcile two aspects in poetry: one is reified by love and sympathy to envision a better state of the material world, despite his constant rejection of didacticism and his assertion that poetry serves no moral purposes; the other is insinuated by obscurity, unknowingness, anti-will, and unconsciousness. Shelley’s efforts to contain the latter in the former in order to justify the cruciality of poetry to human happiness is well established in the *Defence*. Equally well established is his desire to achieve this reconciliation in an effort to assert poets’ status as “the unacknowledged legislators of the World” (*MW* 701). In these regards, Shelley is arguing for a kind of poetry that is “socially

positive”: “Poetry turns all things to loveliness: it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed” (MW 698). However, the extent to which Shelley’s unilateral generalisation of poetry is really displayed in his artistic creation is arguable.

In the *Defence*, Shelley regards Milton as a supreme poetic figure who “stood alone illuminating an age unworthy of him” (MW 685). Shelley considers Milton’s age to be one in which poetry and drama were imbued with “Obscenity, which is ever blasphemy against the divine beauty in life” (685-686). Obscenity is also a veiled monster “for which the corruption of society forever brings forth new food, which it devours in secret” (685-686). Shelley further reasons that the obscene goes beyond the scope of direct erotic depictions; it is an alternative method of artistic representation that perceives “the corruption of society,” or the obscured evil sides of the human world. The obscene is also empowered by its indirect and suggestive—“veiled”—artistic representation, as it “becomes, from the very veil it assumes, more active if less disgusting” (686). Social corruption, according to Shelley, provides materials for obscenity as an alternative form of art and literature. And yet, Shelley does not offer any concrete examples of social corruption, such as religious oppression or political despotism. Instead, he defines it abstractly and metaphysically as something that aims to “extinguish . . . the sensibility to pleasure, passion and natural scenery” (687), adding that it “begins at the imagination and the intellect as at the core, and distributes itself thence as a paralysing venom, through the affections into the very appetites, until all become a torpid mass in which sense hardly survives” (687). Shelley’s word choices of “paralysing venom” and “a torpid mass” undergird his argument that poetic imagination is free from the restraint of will and consciousness. The state resulting from social corruption, “in which hardly sense survives,” also resounds with the state of Dionysian *τό ποιεῖν*, where the Apollonian *τό λογιζεῖν* and the “principle of individuation” are absent. That is, the idea of obscenity fertilised by social corruption can thus be considered another aspect of artistic representation existing in poetry. Shelley recognises such an “obscene” existence in poetry

and indeed he seems determined to reject it in his poetical idealism in the *Defence*. In spite of this, I argue that it is the very “obscene” poetics that he seeks to dispel in the *Defence*, much more than the poetics of love and sympathy, that constitutes the major aesthetic impetus in *The Cenci* and *Laon and Cythna*.

Referring to the poetical power in *Paradise Lost*, Shelley shares a similar evaluation with Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, holding that “Nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan as expressed in *Paradise Lost*” and maintaining that “Milton’s Devil as a moral being is as far superior to his God” (691-692). This is so even though Shelley believes Milton can never “have been intended for the popular personification of evil” (691). The disparity between authorial intention and the reader’s interpretation concerning *Paradise Lost* that Shelley senses here is recapitulated in the case of Count Cenci and Beatrice in *The Cenci*. I argue that Beatrice, with whom Shelley aims to manifest his poetical ideal of love and sympathy, fails to actualise this Shelleyan ideal and is poetically outshone by the character of the count. Her villainous and incestuous father, on the other hand, powerfully demonstrates the “obscene” aspect of poetry—the aesthetic phenomenon of utter assimilation against individual will, against consciousness, against love and sympathy, against social identities, and the bonds/boundaries between them—that Shelley is so resolved to dismiss in the *Defence*.

THE POETIC DESIGNS OF INCEST IN *THE CENCI*

In his 1908 monograph *A Study of Shelley’s Drama The Cenci*, one of the earliest modern studies of Shelley’s play of that name, Ernest Sutherland Bates points out two major factors that result in critics’ neglect of the play: First, the father-daughter incest as a subject matter “is not an attractive or a significant theme for the world to-day”; and second, “*The Cenci* is in its style less individually characteristic of the author than is any other of his mature works” (1). Its discordance with his other writing might stem from the drama’s general dark themes. The play centres on Count Cenci, whose pure

malignance surpasses any other antagonist in Shelley's poetic corpus. Cenci's ultimate triumph is achieved through his murder by Beatrice; the daughter's bloody vengeance (with which she is both morally and aesthetically compromised, as I will demonstrate later) is starkly opposed to Shelley's belief in love, sympathy, non-violence, and forgiveness. Over the course of the twentieth century, however, neither of the factors that Bates highlights have prevented critics from approaching Shelley's play. Indeed, the motif of incest in *The Cenci* has become one of its most fervently discussed topics. Scholars have likewise ruminated on the play's incompatibility with Shelley's other major works.

Echoing to Bates's argument, critical consensus in early Shelley studies is that *The Cenci* is not performable. And yet, as Kenneth N. Cameron and Horst Frenz show in their essay, a considerable number of productions starting in the late nineteenth century seems to counter this academic notion. This gap between theory (*The Cenci* is unperformable) and fact (productions were highly popular) underscores the artistic will to resist the fixed norms, to actualise "the impossible," and to witness the consequences, be they fortunate or catastrophic. From another perspective, to stage the unstageable realises Shelley's original intention for the play to "make apparent some of the most dark and secret caverns of the human heart" (MW 315), that is, to show the "obscene/unpresentable" aspects of human nature. As my analysis will demonstrate, Shelley's poetical representation of incestuous rape in the play also reflects the issue of staging the unstageable, of presenting the unpresentable. Shelley achieves this through his suggestive poetics, as well as through his designs of Count Cenci's other atrocities.

The very first production of *The Cenci* was staged by the Shelley Society at the Grand Theatre of Islington in May 1886. As Cameron and Frenz note, the result of this performance also generated a disparity between the audience reception and critical evaluation. The former was enthusiastically positive, while the latter confirmed that the play should not have been staged. Cameron's and Frenz's historical tracing shows the

contemporary comments on the production in the Victorian drama circle. Regarding the play's morality, the press and critics denounced *The Cenci* with phrases such as the following: "blood-curdling, horrible, revolting"; "no flash of genial humour, no gleam of innocent gaiety"; "Stygian darkness"; and "utterly obscene as hardly to bear telling" (qtd. in Cameron and Frenz 1083). And yet, the audience enthusiastically received it. If, then, the critics' comments accurately reflect the audience's psychological reactions to the play, we have evidence of humankind's dark and violent inclinations. To put it another way, emotionally the nineteenth-century critics may have taken pleasure in watching the horror put on stage (certainly the audience did), but their moral consciousness, controlled by the social milieu, compelled them to condemn its theatrical representations. The pleasure taken is indeed not a "gleam of innocent gaiety," but a form of negative pleasure of self-annihilation evoked by terror and suffering that is associated with the Burkean sublime (as discussed in Introduction). The critics cannot name this form of pleasure because indulging in it would align their sympathy with Count Cenci and would thus cause them to renounce an identity that is affiliated with the morals of the civic gentry. The critics' subjectivity, sustained by a rigid adherence to social norms, would be endangered through their dark relishing of a play fuelled by Count Cenci's atrocities upon his children—of a drama that stages the "obscene."

Setting him apart from the critics, Shelley himself holds *The Cenci* in a very high esteem. As a work that is vastly distinctive from his other writing, he is strongly inclined to see it staged since he believes it would be enormously popular. Shelley directly mentions his opinion on the play on many occasions. For example, in a letter written to Thomas Love Peacock on 20 July 1819, Shelley states that *The Cenci* is "written without any of the peculiar feelings & opinions which characterize my other compositions" with "the greatest degree of popular effect" (LS 2.102). He also expresses his wish to see its production at Covent Garden, and in this case he even proposes who should play the main characters: Beatrice was to be played by Eliza O'Neil and her father played by Edmund Kean (LS 2.102). In his

several letters to the publisher, Charles Ollier, Shelley repeatedly expresses his belief in *The Cenci* as a dramatic composition with the potential for great public appeal. "I have two works of some length," he says in a letter written in August 1819, "one of a very popular character" (LS 2.111). In another letter written in September of the same year, he states that the play is "calculated to produce a very popular effect & totally in a different style from any thing I have yet composed" (LS 2.116-117). The word "calculated" that Shelley uses to describe his intention in composing *The Cenci* is striking: In the *Defence* he dismisses certain kinds of poetical works as being corrupted by "scientific and economical knowledge" and "concealed by the accumulation of facts and calculating processes" (MW 695). In this inferior form, poetry is subdued by the will of "Self" and its "calculating faculty," becoming instead the embodiment of "the Mammon of the world" (696). Shelley's usage of the word "calculated" in the letter to Ollier seems to categorise *The Cenci* as the very corrupted and inferior kind of poetry. Furthermore, in the latter part of his letter to Peacock, Shelley mentions that he wishes to be anonymous in the initial publication of *The Cenci*. After its success he adds, "I would own it if I pleased, & use the celebrity it might acquire to my own purposes" (LS 2.102). Shelley's deliberate anonymity to gain self-interest sounds, to some extent, "calculating." The nature of this play is certainly distinctive in Shelley's corpus as it, ironically, fits his category of "the non-poetic" phenomenon circumscribed by rationality and pragmatism. In other words, it consists of the "calculating faculties" that are in opposition to his conceptualisation of artistic imagination.

Shelley's constant juxtaposition of *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci* is also worth noticing. In his letter to Ollier on 6 March 1820, Shelley writes: "'Prometheus Unbound', I must tell you, is my favourite poem; I charge you, therefore, specially to pet him and feed him with fine ink and good paper. 'Cenci' is written for the multitude, and ought to sell well . . . the 'Prometheus' cannot sell beyond twenty copies" (LS 2.174). In another letter to Ollier dated 16 February 1821, Shelley remarks, "For 'Prometheus' I expect and desire no great sale. 'The Cenci' ought to have been popular" (LS

2.263). When expressing his disappointment about the rejection of *The Cenci* by Covent Garden—"The very Theatre rejected it with expressions of the greatest insolence"—Shelley abruptly concludes, "about all this I don't much care. But of all that I have late sent, 'Prometheus' is my favourite" (LS 2.181). Judging from these letters, Shelley's opinions of *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci* indicate a strong self-awareness of the poet's own artistic creations and their positions in both his ideal and the reader/audience reception. There is a clear division indicated in these letters between a more transcending and otherworldly poetic sphere and a more secular, material one of popular appeal. Respecting aesthetic evaluation, Shelley undoubtedly holds the former in higher esteem. In other words, *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci* are at the remote ends of his poetic spectrum. The former, as Jeffrey N. Cox remarks, is a "liberatory drama" that "turns from the violent past to embrace a future founded upon forgiveness and passive resistance" ("The Dramatist" 81). On the contrary, the latter is a play centring on two components: incestuous desire as a means of patriarchal oppression; and a bloody and vengeful patricide. It is a form of swift, violent, eye-for-an-eye justice that risks falling into the very despotism Shelley himself wishes to counter. Moreover, Shelley is fully aware that *The Cenci's* sensationalism—the "obscenity" that feeds on social corruption, which he highlights in the *Defence*—is far more appealing to the general public than the material found in *Prometheus Unbound*. "Calculated to produce a very popular effect" (LS 2.116), *The Cenci* as a poetic/dramatic work is not only an antithesis of *Prometheus Unbound*, but is also a representation of everything that, in the *Defence*, Shelley rejects as "non-poetic." I do not raise these issues from the letters in order to underscore Shelley's inconsistency. After all, as the *Defence* was written two years later than *The Cenci*, it is possible that his thinking about poetical creation evolved in the interim. My intention is to accentuate the unique status of *The Cenci*, acknowledged not only by critics but also by Shelley himself. Such uniqueness lies in the profound disparity between Shelley's authorial intention, fully articulated in the Preface of *The Cenci* and the *Defence*, and the actual artistic works he presents. The

disparity is also deeply correlated with the conflicts between Shelleyan moral poetics of love and sympathy supposedly actualised by Beatrice the heroine but which, as I shall demonstrate later, Shelley fails to achieve, and the “obscene” aesthetics of violence, twisted desire, and sheer malice embodied by Shelley’s poetic design of Count Cenci.

In Act 1 scene 1, Shelley writes the following lines to lay the foundation for Count Cenci’s characterisation:

All men delight in sensual luxury,
All men enjoy revenge; and most exult
Over the tortures they can never feel—
Flattering their secret peace with others’ pain.
But I delight in nothing else. I love
The sight of agony, and the sense of joy,
When this shall be another’s, and that mine.
And I have no remorse and little fear,
Which are, I think, the checks of other men. (1.1.77-85)

In this passage, we see a typical rascal of seventeenth-century libertinism. He is not unlike the titular character in Mozart’s opera *Don Giovanni*, a reinterpretation of the Don Juan legend that Shelley praised, enjoyed, and saw three times in 1818.⁵⁰ Ronald Tetreault notes the opera’s possible impact on Shelley’s writing, arguing that the final sextet is similar to the final scene of Act 3 of *Prometheus Unbound*. The final sextet that concludes *Don Giovanni* is generally a passage for the “good” characters to display their shock over the evil rapist’s supernatural downfall and to preach the ultimate moral, “Questo è il fin di chi fa mal.”⁵¹ However, with the exception of its 1787 premiere in Prague, the productions of *Don Giovanni* omitted this final scene throughout the nineteenth century. It was not restored until the twentieth century, at which time it was included in most modern

⁵⁰ Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, with the libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte and premiered in Prague in 1787, retells the legendary amorous adventure of Don Juan. In the beginning of the opera, after attempting to rape Donna Anna, Giovanni kills her father, the Commendatore, who comes to defend his daughter’s honour. After a series of attempts to seduce other women and to escape justice, Giovanni encounters the stature of the late Commendatore in a graveyard. As the stature declares that justice will be done upon him soon, Giovanni defiantly invites it to dinner. In the final banquet, the ghost of the Commendatore arrives and demands Giovanni’s repentance. The libertine defies the demand and is dragged into Hell.

⁵¹ “Such is always the wretched end of evildoers.” The translations from *Don Giovanni*’s Italian libretto here are all mine.

productions.⁵² Therefore, it is doubtful that Shelley actually saw the final scene of *Don Giovanni* when he attended the opera. Even if he did, it is also doubtful that he would have been moved by this obviously didactic ending. He would likely have seen it as “a dramatic aftereffect, a reinstatement of boring normality,” as Daniel Herwitz comments (121), because in terms of dramatic and musical tension, it is inferior to the sublime terror of the previous Commendatore scene. As Lydia Goehr and Herwitz both observe, the final sextet and ensemble show “a dripping falsetto cheerfulness,” adding that “[d]uring the nineteenth century this final scene struck some in the musical world as so obviously false that they omitted it entirely, believing the opera ended better perishing in D minor” (xv) of the Commendatore scene. Hence, I hold a more reserved attitude toward Tereault’s correlation between the final sextet-ensemble and Act 3 of *Prometheus Unbound*, though both scenes present the literary convention of restoration from chaos to order.

The characterisation of Giovanni himself (achieved through both Mozart’s music and Lorenzo Da Ponte’s libretto), I would speculate, has more intense impact than the sextet-ensemble on Shelley, who parallels Giovanni with Lord Byron in a conversation with Thomas Medwin (Hunt, *The Autography* 295). Indeed, Giovanni’s amorous pursuits, utter contempt for social norms, remorseless commitments to sensual enjoyments, and defiance against religious authority easily evoke an image of the Byronic hero. Consider two compelling lines sung by Giovanni, during the ball scene at the end of Act 1: “È aperto a tutti quanti, / Viva la libertà!”⁵³ This celebration of equality and freedom (however superficial and ironic, considering how frequently he exploits his noble title) in the context of post-Revolution 1817 is a representation of both the initial revolutionary passion and the later violence derived from it. Consider in the same context Count Cenci’s championing of “sensual luxury” and his exultation “Over the tortures they can never feel” and “secret peace with others’ pain.” These resound with

⁵² For the problematic *scena ultima* of *Don Giovanni* and its inclusion and omission in different productions, see Ian Woodfield’s study, *The Vienna Don Giovanni* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010), pp. 95-110.

⁵³ “It [the banquet] is open to all; / Long live liberty!”

Giovanni's hedonist and materialist declaration: "Vivan le femmine! Viva il buon vino! / Sostegno e gloria d'umanità!"⁵⁴ These lines are mockingly and disdainfully sung in response to the earnest and agonised plea of his former victim, Donna Elvira, for him to cast off his reprobate ways.

Both villains demonstrate that the suffering of others intensifies material and sensual pleasures. In Count Cenci's confession that he has "no remorse and little fear, / Which are, I think, the checks of other men," we can observe a similar adamant will to continue on his self-chosen path to that which we see in *Don Giovanni's* Commendatore scene. The music of the Commendatore, as Herwitz points out, is of the form of "declamation, standard rhetoric in *opera seria*, pronouncements by gods, divinities, and oracles" that "commands authority and insists upon commandment" (121). Giovanni's defiant refusal to repent, even when he is confronted by the terrible ghost of the Commendatore and all-consuming hellfire, cause him to once again, transcend the judgments of social norms and moral laws—to go "beyond good and evil," as Nietzsche puts it. In this very scene, Giovanni perhaps evokes Byron's *Manfred* (Act 3 scene 1) in Shelley's mind. In Byron's work, the afflicted yet proud hero rejects the religious console and urge for penitence offered by the Abbot of St. Maurice. Such remorseless conviction (be it evil or not) displayed by Mozart's scoundrel and coloured by certain tinges of a typical Byronic hero is reflected in Shelley's composition of *The Cenci* and his design of the play's arch-villain. Indeed, as Bates remarks, Count Cenci has "his own courage in opposition to the prescript of society" and "the pride of the heroes in Byron's romantic poems" (67). In terms of Shelley's view on *Don Giovanni*, Tetreault refers to the poet's comment on Giuseppe Ambrogetti, the baritone who sang the role: "He seems to be the very wretch he personates" (159). Tetreault is probably right to argue that "Despite its Satanic attractiveness, the character did not deceive Shelley" (159). Shelley is aware that he is depicting an evil figure who takes pleasure in others' sufferings; yet, it is exactly through his unwavering evil that the character gains a major aesthetic impetus of poetry. Shelley proposes in the

⁵⁴ "Long live women! Long live fine wine / Which are the pillars and glories of humanity!"

Defence that we see the same impetus in *Paradise Lost*, and it is by this impetus that Satan, who “has conceived to be excellent in spite of adversity and torture,” achieves superiority over God (*MW* 692).

Act 1 scene 3 of *The Cenci* presents an initial climax for the reader/audience to further grasp Count Cenci’s nature and his relationship with his children. This scene comprises the “banquet of horror,” the literary convention that provides a drastic shift of dramatic air from festive mirth to a shocking revelation of horrible truths, usually including gruesome death, ghosts, or madness.⁵⁵ In the first speech that Count Cenci delivers to his guests in this scene, he seems to clarify the rumoured accusations against him by urging those to whom he is offering hospitality to “think me flesh and blood as well as you; / Sinful indeed, for Adam made all so, / But tender-hearted, meek and pitiful” (1.3.11-13). This is not a hypocritical attempt to earn goodwill or trust, but a deliberate and playful trick to intensify the abrupt shift in atmosphere from joy to horror that he is about to precipitate. The reader/audience has been prepared for a catastrophic outcome ever since Beatrice’s revelation to Orsino that her father “has heard some happy news / From Salamanca, from my brothers there,” and “would gladlier celebrate their deaths” in the previous scene (1.2.48-52). Nevertheless, it is still a compelling moment when Count Cenci announces that “the most desired event” for which he intends to share “a common joy” with guests is in fact his sons’ deaths in Salamanca. Critics such as Jerrold E. Hogle perceives this scene to be the count’s “theatrical mirroring”: “He is so much a theatrical character that his very significance—and certainly his continued power over others—depends on the reaction of an auditor to his aggression” (*Shelley’s Process* 150). Furthermore, the antagonism between a parent and his children, echoing with the archetypal conflict between the Old Testament father-Jehovah and the New Testament son-Jesus (the “human form divine”) in Blake’s system, is here established. This antagonism is confirmed later by

⁵⁵ Other examples, to name a few, include the banquet scenes in Act 5 of *Titus Andronicus* and Act 3 of *Macbeth*, the wedding at the beginning of Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, and the ballad of “Alfonso the Brave and Fair Imogene” in Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*. Perhaps another memorable example, taken from our time, is “The Red Wedding” in George R. R. Martin’s fantasy novel *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

the Pope's remark that "Children are disobedient, and they sting / Their fathers' hearts to madness and despair" (2.2.32-33). "[T]he great war between the old and young" (2.2.38) then becomes the dark theme that haunts the entire play.

Count Cenci's viciously joyful announcement of his two sons' deaths and their causes duly presents Shelley's view of religion:

. . . God!
I thank thee! In one night didst thou perform,
By ways inscrutable, the thing I sought,
My disobedient and rebellious sons
Are dead! (1.3.40-44)

In response to this horrible revelation, which Count Cenci attributes to God's will, Beatrice's attempt to comfort the fainting Lucretia is demonstrative of the play's expression of God's supposed goodness and justice. Beatrice, in other words, counters her father's attribution of his sons' deaths to providence, aiming to comfort Lucretia with the following words: "there is a God in Heaven, / He would not live to boast of such a boon" (1.3.52-53). Her father quickly contests this counterargument, claiming that in the deaths of her brothers, the "most favouring Providence was shown" (57): One is crushed to death attending a mass when the church collapses, and the other is accidentally murdered by a cuckolded lover. The two incidents happen "in the self-same hour of the same night; / Which shows that Heaven has special care of me" (64-65). Here the father and the daughter argue for two distinctive aspects of Christian divinity, predating the "Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere" that is both "Destroyer and Preserver" in the poet's later composition, "Ode to the West Wind" (*MW* 412).

In this scene of the count's complete triumph, Shelley accentuates the violent aspect of Christian God.⁵⁶ The irony of Rocco's death while attending

⁵⁶ The Count's faith in a malignant God bears a resemblance to the concept of Nature in the eighteenth-century French materialist philosophy, propelled by the development and spreading of scientific knowledge. This philosophy, seen in Julien Offray de La Mettrie and Denis Diderot's works, proposes an unseen cosmological order in which the strong subsists and thrives by preying on the weak. In this philosophy, evil can better enrich the cosmos than goodness. Such is the alternative faith espoused by the amoral and depraved characters in, for example, Marquis de Sade's novels. See David Coward's introduction to the Oxford edition of Sade's *The Misfortunes of Virtue and Other Early Tales* (xxxii).

a mass in a collapsing church that kills another sixteen innocent Christians, and the coincidence that the tragic incident occurs on “twenty-seventh of December,” the Eve of the Holy Innocents, attest to Shelley’s poignant criticism of the human folly of constructing a moral system on the basis of religiosity. Beatrice does not know that this very God she and her villainous father both name is not an all-loving and just deity. Instead, God is the “Wild Spirit,” a “Maenad,” and “dirge” in Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind.” That is, in so far as the divinity she names has formed the world with cruel mutability, God is utterly amoral—completely unconcerned with what is right and what is wrong. (This is quite different from being “immoral,” which is inextricably linked with morality.)

The divine mutability that works here in Count Cenci’s favour is the very fountain of poetry that lifts a poet up and hurls him “upon the thorns of life,” making him bleed. In other words, as Shelley puts forth in the *Defence*, human suffering is the very poetic truth, the “original purity and force” of the hidden divine order that a poet is obliged to adorn and represent with poetic words.⁵⁷ Beatrice’s weak denial of a malignant God also predates the final line of “Ode to the West Wind,” which Shelley changes from an affirmative line (“When Winter comes Spring lags not far behind”) to a doubtful one (“If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?”). What Shelley’s revision in “Ode” implies, and what Beatrice fails to see in Act 1 scene 3, is that the divine order does not secure human happiness for the “good people.” By contrast, innocent suffering is the key driver; it propels the cosmological progression. Following this, great poetry gains materials from pain, sorrow, and wretchedness caused by malignance and cruelty: The “monster of obscenity” feeds on “the corruption of society” (*Defence*, *MW* 685-686). With the father-daughter argument over the inclination of divine order in the beginning of *The Cenci*, Shelley arguably indicates that this play will focus on a sort of

⁵⁷ Shelley’s argument that poetry created by poets is already a decline from truth—“a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet” (*MW* 697)—is a very Platonic concept that affirms a primitive and unstained idea and its fallen representations in the material world. It also echoes Nietzsche’s contention in *The Birth of Tragedy* that words’ limited ability to represent alleviates the unbearable terror of the poetic truth and renders it approachable by human perception.

“negative poetics” that borders on what he regards in the *Defence* as “the obscene.” This poetics outshines the positive poetics of love and sympathy Beatrice unsuccessfully represents.

Count Cenci’s wicked “libation” on his dead sons is another demonstration of religious inversion:

Oh, thou bright wine whose purple splendour leaps
And bubbles gaily in this golden bowl
Under the lamplight, as my spirits do,
To hear the death of my accursèd sons!
Could I believe thou wert their mingled blood,
Then would I taste thee like a sacrament (1.3.77-82)

In this grotesque parody of the Eucharist, Jesus’s sacrificial blood shed to redeem the sin of humankind is “strongly misread,” as Harold Bloom might put it. Rocco’s and Stephano’s innocent blood accomplishes their father’s sadistic exultation. Such is the mockery of the New Testament tenet of love and forgiveness (represented by the Eucharist) by the Old Testament despotism (represented by the count as a tyrannical father). Count Cenci’s constant exploitation of Christian images and motifs highlights Shelley’s perception of religious people in the nineteenth-century Italy, for whom religion “is adoration, faith, submission, penitence, blind admiration” rather than “a rule for moral conduct.” Shelley goes on to point out that this kind of religion has “no necessary connection with any one virtue,” for “The most atrocious villain may be rigidly devout” (“Preface,” *MW* 317). Even though, in all seven possible textual sources of *The Cenci*, Count Cenci’s greatest crime is atheism,⁵⁸ Shelley deliberately deviates from the historical fact of Count Cenci’s denouncement of God. In Shelley’s version, Cenci believes in God, but the belief is in a deity that endorses all the count’s wicked deeds. The inversion of the Christian rite of Holy Communion and the ensuing chaotic state that concludes the scene evoke the maniacal phenomenon of the heretic ritual of Dionysus. Such a practice was abhorred by the eighteenth-century theologians as an “obscene blasphemy” that was

⁵⁸ See Truman Guy Steffan’s summarisation and analysis of these historical documents in his study “Seven Accounts of the Cenci and Shelley’s Drama” in the 1969 issue of *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*.

empowered by a transgression of taboos and boundaries that demarcated the sacred from the profane. In the final tumultuous exchange of words between the father and the daughter in this scene, Beatrice's lines foreshadow the upcoming theme of vengeance:

Father, never dream,
Though thou mayst overbear this company,
But ill must come of ill. —Frown not on me!
Haste, hide thyself, lest with avenging looks
My brothers' ghosts should hunt thee from thy seat! (1.3.149-53)

By auguring a revenge against her father ("But ill must come of ill") and calling for her brothers' spectres, she potentially alienates herself from the benign God who delegates a religious system founded on the Shelleyan "internalised morality" of love and sympathy. At this moment, Beatrice's lines associate her with a failure to represent the positive aspects of poetry that Shelley articulates in the *Defence*. Another major motif regarded as obnoxious and obscene by early critics is also prefigured in Count Cenci's speech, which concludes Act 1. Upon his daughter's growing defiance, the count implies that there is a means to subjugate Beatrice: "I know a charm shall make thee meek and tame" (1.3.167). His idea—to rape her—is so heinous that even makes himself hesitant to execute it: "I feel my spirit fail / With thinking what I have decreed to do" (1.3.171-72). But this momentary doubt turns into resolve in the final line: "It must be done; it shall be done, I swear!" (1.3.178). The motif of incest is insinuated here with Count Cenci's stressing on the word "done," which, as Leader and O'Neill suggest, is inspired by Shakespeare's frequent usage of the word in *Macbeth* to imply regicide (MW 756). Both Beatrice's patricide and Macbeth's regicide stand for the breach of conventional and hierarchal relationships between social identities. In other words, both signify the terror of the breakdown of identity (Beatrice as a daughter and Macbeth as a subject) and normalcy (their supposed love and loyalty to the count and the king). Shelley has established the fundamental characterisations of Count Cenci and Beatrice and the conflicting state between them as the strife between different aspects not only of religion but also of poetry. The two major themes—violent revenge and parent-child incest—seamlessly fit into Shelley's category of the obscene

representations that feed on “social corruption,” calculated to intensify the aforementioned strife.

We become increasingly aware of Count Cenci’s intention to commit the act of incest at the beginning of Act 2, in which we are introduced to Beatrice’s agitation and fear, although we are not yet privy to the cause of them. Her emotions culminate in madness in Act 3, after Cenci has raped her off-stage, between these two acts. At the level of action and language, Shelley avoids direct representation of such a controversial motif; Count Cenci’s incestuous rape of Beatrice is never shown on-stage, nor is it explicitly named in the entire play. Nevertheless, Bates points out that the consequences of implying it resulted in critics’ major objections to the play’s production as well as critical dismissals throughout the nineteenth century. In later Shelley studies, the incest motif in *The Cenci* started to be tackled as such. That is, incest is not merely one of the examples of the Count’s “pure malice,” as early critics, such as Bates, maintain. Before examining the incestuous rape in *The Cenci*, the intense contrast between parent-child incest and sibling incest in Shelley’s views and works has to be highlighted first. Richard Cronin observes that for Shelley, sibling incest is “a static ideal of self-subsistence for an ideal of reciprocity” (65). In “Incest as Romantic Symbol,” Peter Thorslev also distinguishes the two incest motifs in English Romanticism; he argues that for Byron (from whose biography we can infer his accepting attitude toward sibling incest case) and Shelley, parent-child incest is a representation of political/religious oppression, while sibling incest “is invariably made sympathetic, is sometimes exonerated, and in Byron’s and Shelley’s works, is definitely idealized” (47). The motif of the aged tyrant preying on his own children, as Thorslev remarks, is one of the peculiar traits of the Romantic period: The past was “parasitic upon the future,” and the outdated “fathers, authorities, and traditions” were “unwilling to grow old gracefully and wither away,” “even attempting grotesquely to renew their youth by devouring their young or by reproducing upon them” (47). Shelley’s treatment of father-daughter incest in *The Cenci*, however, does not merely stand in contrast to the ideal of incestuous love between siblings, nor is it

simply another pernicious exemplification of patriarchal oppression. Instead it stands for, on a subtler level, Shelley's mastering of that aspect of poetry that he apparently dismisses in the *Defence*—the “obscene.”

According to a study by Truman Guy Steffan, all seven historical accounts of the Cenci incident, including four editions of the anonymous “Relation of the Death of the Cenci Family” in Italian and the two rendered and published by Mary Shelley in *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, record that Count Cenci attempted to sexually assault Beatrice. Likewise, all seven accounts reference his wicked remark that the offspring of such an incestuous union will be a saint. However, none of them record that he succeeded in raping his daughter. In other words, Shelley significantly changes the historical facts concerning the Cenci incident, as regards the count's incestuous desire for Beatrice and his other atrocities (the latter of which will be described below). This is so despite Shelley's claim that “At all events it is matter-of-fact” (*LS* 2.198) in his letter to Lord Byron on 26 May 1820.⁵⁹ Monica Brezinski Potkay's study on the sources of *The Cenci* corroborates this detail: “Shelley largely created the legend of the Cenci incest. He posited as a completed act what earlier writers described as an unsuccessful attempt or series of attempts” (57). That is to say, Shelley handles the father-daughter incest in his sources of the Cenci incident with a three-phase process of representation. First, he actualises the unaccomplished incestuous rape in his play; second, he renders it off-stage between Act 2 and Act 3, and refrains from naming it in any line of the play; third, he brings it back onto the stage in a highly suggestive poetics by representing Cenci's other atrocities with symbolic meanings. For Shelley, the actual incestuous consummation is so crucial that he has to modify the historical accounts to which he has access in order to actualise it in the plot, albeit off-stage. Shelley's fictionalised rape is more than a narrative device employed, as Barbara Groseclose argues in her “The Incest Motif in

⁵⁹ We must, however, bear in mind that all these sources are not absolutely truthful accounts of the incident; they are “necessarily distorted because the investigation of the accused and the papal archives had not been open to the public” (Steffan 601). “The historical facts” I refer to here are probably not the authentic history, but are instead the “facts” in which Shelley believes and that he asserts to have accurately represented in his play.

Shelley's *The Cenci*," to "link serious provocation with the magnitude of crime" and justify Beatrice's later patricide (226).

As indicated above, Shelley's suggestive poetics brings the "obscene/off-stage" incest motif implicitly onto the stage. Act 2 begins with Beatrice storming into Lucretia's room in agitation. She calls out to God, but the tone is almost sceptical: "Thou, great God, / whose image upon earth a father is, / Dost thou indeed abandon me!" (2.1.16-18). She speaks of a nameless fear from her father: "I see his face; / He frowns on others, but he smiles on me" (19-20). In these lines Beatrice overlaps the image of her father with God, insinuating her alienation from her previous belief in a benign and all-loving deity. The "frown" and the "smile" imply that she faces an extraordinary threat from her father; they also draw attention to her sexuality (an aspect of children's characters that is not commonly dwelt on in relation to their parents). Asked by Lucretia and Bernardo about the origin of her agitation and dread, Beatrice replies that "It was one word, Mother, one little word; / One look, one smile" (2.1.63-64). Her extremely restrained lexicon in describing the unnameable deed, in "*a forced calmness*" (as Shelley instructs in a stage direction), heightens the tension and the reader/audience's curiosity in the source of her distress. The concept of obscurity in the Burkean sublime that entices human sensation is subtly at work here.

Shelley's suggestive poetics that brings the off-stage incest back onto stage is based on his elaboration of the Count's atrocities, which are innovative in so far as they deviate from historical accounts. Most sources record Count Cenci's vicious treatments of his wife and children. One of the sources on which perhaps Shelley relies the most is Mary Shelley's translation of the "Relation of the Death of the Family of the Cenci," included in the 1874 reprinted version of 1839 edition of Shelley's poetical works edited by Mary and published by Edward Moxon. In this source, the count's deeds are detailed. In it, there is also an elder daughter who, along with Beatrice, is the victim of their father's violence. However, her supplication to the Pope results in her being granted a marriage to a gentleman, by which

she is liberated from her father's threats. Count Cenci, as Mary Shelley's text goes, "fearing that his youngest would, when she grew up, follow the example of her sister . . . shut her up alone in an apartment of the palace, where he himself brought her food, so that no one might approach her; and imprisoned her in this manner for several months, often inflicting on her blows with a stick" (*PWS* 161). The source does not contain any physical or verbal abuse towards Beatrice's other brothers, except that the count rejoices in hearing the deaths of Rocco and Cristofero (Cristofano in *The Cenci*), "saying that nothing would exceed his pleasure if all children died," and "as a further sign of his hatred, he refused to pay the smallest sum towards the funeral expenses of his murdered son" (161). Percy Shelley also omits two common facts shared by all the historical documents: Count Cenci's crime of sodomy and promiscuity with other women (Steffan 606). These changes function to remove any distractions from his focus on the father-daughter incest. Deviating from his sources, Shelley revises the count's original misdeeds in *The Cenci*, in order to bring the off-stage incest motif back onto the stage.

After the prefiguration in Act 1, Shelley indirectly introduces the incest motif in Act 2 by having Beatrice recount the count's earlier acts of mental and physical violence against her youngest brother, Bernardo, and herself:

Oh! He has trampled me
Under his feet, and made the blood stream down
My pallid cheeks. And he has given us all
Ditch water, and the fever-stricken flesh
Of buffaloes, and bade us eat or starve,
And we have eaten. —He has made me look
On my beloved Bernardo, when the rust
Of heavy chains has gangrened his sweet limbs,
And I have never yet despaired—but now!
What would I say? (*Recovering herself*)
Ah! no, 'tis nothing new. (2.1.64-72)

In these lines, Shelley's detailed depiction of Count Cenci's abhorrent abuses of Beatrice and Bernardo extends far beyond the scope of all sources, including Mary Shelley's translation of the "Relation." The significance of this invention lies in its parallelism with the implication of the unnameable incestuous crime embedded in Beatrice's lines. In *The Cenci*, instead of

“blows with a stick” as we encounter in the “Relation,” the violence is aggravated: the count “tramples” on Beatrice’s face. Furthermore, Percy Shelley’s narrative deviates from other sources’ emphasis on external force to a focus on the count’s internal corruption, which is embodied by “Ditch water, and the fever-stricken flesh,” water and food that are contaminated, bordering on the transgression of the boundary between purity and uncleanness. As Maggie Kilgour proposes in her study on the cultural significance of cannibalism, eating is essentially an act of incorporation—an undertaking concerning the somatic boundary between the inside and the outside. It “involves a delicate balance of simultaneous identification and separation that is typified by the act of incorporation, in which an external object is taken inside another” (4). Absorbing proper food fortifies the boundary between the internal and the external, while consuming unclean food weakens and even breaches it. Therefore, Shelley’s innovation of contaminated food in Beatrice’s speech vastly deviates from every source of the Cenci incident and has subtle meanings. Viewed through Mary Douglas’s anthropological lens, “Ditch water” and “fever-stricken flesh” are not as unclean as, for example, dirt, rubbish, or excrement, whose inedible otherness is so obvious that it is easy to exclude them from a list of edibles. Ditch water and fever-stricken flesh, therefore, are closer than these to edibles because they still maintain certain propensities of food proper; it is exactly this “half-identity” that destabilises the boundary between filth and food disables Beatrice from repelling the contaminated and from resisting her father’s covert will to pollute her from the somatically inside.⁶⁰ As Kilgour also points out, “consume” and “consummate” are the same word in French, thus accentuating the connection between eating and sex. Both actions demonstrate “the fallaciousness of the illusion of self-sufficiency and autonomy that the inside/outside opposition tries to uphold by constructing firm boundary lines between ourselves and the world” (9). Beatrice’s consumption of “Ditch water” and “fever-stricken flesh” potentially signifies

⁶⁰ For Douglas’s discussion of the significance of the unclean objects and their ambiguous “half-identities” in religious rituals, see Chapter 9 of *Purity and Danger*, p. 173-195.

her father's incestuous desire, whose fulfilment is an action of symbolic eating—the utter incorporation that “creates a total identity between eater and eaten while insisting on the total control—literal consumption—of the latter by the former” (Kilgour 7).

The bodily suffering inflicted on Bernardo by the Count—“the rust / Of heavy chains has gangrened his sweet limbs”—can also be interpreted from the same symbolic perspective. Shelley deviates from the direct physical violence, such as beating or whipping, that is recorded in all sources of the Cenci incident. With artistic liberty, he adds Bernardo's “gangrene,” a specific kind of pathological wound that, in *A Dictionary of the English Language* by Samuel Johnson, is defined as “a stoppage of circulation followed by putrefaction” and shares synonymous relations with other words such as “corruption” and “mortification” (Johnson 1804). The “gangrene” suffered by Bernardo, along with the “Ditch water” and “fever-stricken flesh” consumed by himself and Beatrice, are symbolic in that they suggest that the count's dark intention is to corrupt his children (especially Beatrice) from *within*; that is, the vicious father seeks to effect an evil “becoming” in his children that begins on the inside. Moreover, both acts are dramatic devices by which Shelley insinuates the unnameable, “obscene/off-stage” incestuous desire of the count, as Beatrice potentially parallels them with incest by saying that they are “nothing new” after her incestuous rape by the count. Working in this way, Shelley's unique rewriting of the Cenci children's sufferings serves to lay bare the nature of father-daughter incest in a highly suggestive manner; in other words, the count's incestuous desire is a further attempt to internally corrupt his offspring, an extended manoeuvre to irreversibly alter Beatrice from the inside, to “Let her then wish for the night” (2.1.187), as in the play “the night” represents a dark realm of evil in which Count Cenci executes his atrocities. What he desires through the act of incest that dissolves all social boundaries is a complete incorporation of Beatrice into evil and the creation of an alter ego in her mind, to which his speeches in Act 4 will attest.⁶¹

⁶¹ Hogle interprets the rape as Count Cenci's ultimate attempt to destroy Beatrice's growing defiance, which “exposes the merely staged, rhetorical, and dependent basis of his power.” Hogle adds that through the rape, the count is able to create “a state of nothingness” in

Another innovation of Count Cenci's ill treatment of his children that functions to intensify the momentum of unspeakable incest is the subsistence deprivation of his eldest son Giacomo. In Act 2 scene 2, Giacomo discloses his father's misdeed to Camillo:

'Tis hard for a firm man to bear: but I
Have a dear wife, a lady of high birth,
Whose dowry in ill hour I lent my father
Without a bond or witness to the deed:
And children, who inherit her fine senses,
The fairest creatures in the breathing world;
And she and they reproach me not. (2.2.18-24)

At this stage, the effects of the count's deliberate withholding of Giacomo's dowry have not yet appeared. Though suffering in poverty, Giacomo's wife and children still love him and believe in him. The hidden significance of Shelley's design here is manifested in Act 3 scene 1, where Count Cenci annihilates their love and faith by fabricating a story in front of Giacomo's wife that her husband has squandered the dowry himself in "secret riot" (3.1.320). After his wife relates this invented story to their children, they are all convinced that their father is the reason for their poverty. Consequently, all filial affection is corrupted and degraded to despair and potentially, wrath and hatred: "Give us clothes, father! Give us better food! / What you in one night squander were enough / For months!" (3.1.328-30). What the count accomplishes here is not mere playful malice, but another extended variation of the "internal corruption" shared by Beatrice and Bernardo. Moreover, it indicates the count's ultimate intent to assimilate Giacomo by driving a wedge between Giacomo and his family that mirrors the wedge the count has already driven between him and his own children. In short, the count intends to make Giacomo the very paternal tyrant hated by his own family and by Giacomo himself. Indeed, the count succeeds in doing so, as Giacomo further laments: "I looked, and saw that home was hell. / And to that hell will I return no more" (3.1.330-31). All these unique abuses imposed by the count on Beatrice, Bernardo, and Giacomo—contaminated food, gangrene, and the

Beatrice's consciousness that he will "contain absolutely in his phallic aggression" (*Shelley's Process* 151).

provocation of Giacomo's family feud—are Shelley's poetic inventions. They replace the ordinary physical violence and licentiousness recorded in his source materials in an effort to insinuate the obscene/off-stage incest as a means by which the count converts, corrupts, and assimilates Beatrice from within. As she herself says after the rape: "But now!—O blood, which art my father's blood, / Circling through these contaminated veins" (3.1.95-96).

After the incestuous rape, Beatrice's uncontrolled agitation confirms the effectiveness of the Count's design: "I, who can feign no image in my mind / Of that which has transformed me" (3.1.108-09). Beatrice, whose heart "Is like a ghost shrouded and folded up / In its own formless horror" (110-11), has detached herself from the New Testament God of love, sympathy, and forgiveness. She has become an agent of the vengeful Old Testament deity, determined to execute "something which shall make / The thing that I have suffered but a shadow / In the dread lightning which avenges it" (87-89). In the conversation that takes place between Beatrice, Lucretia, and Orsino in Act 3 scene 1, Shelley again executes various suggestive methods to present the unnameable and off-stage incestuous rape. In Beatrice's lines the incestuous rape is "a wrong so great and strange, / That neither life nor death can give me rest" (139-40). It belongs to "deeds / Which have no form, sufferings which have no tongue" (141-42). If she speaks of the crime, her "tongue should like a knife tear out the secret / Which cankers my heart's core" and "lay all bare / So that my unpolled fame should be / With vilest gossips a stale mouthèd story" (156-59). Apart from employing obscurity to intensify the mysterious terror of incest, Shelley also indicates the incest's obscene/unpresentable nature as a social taboo. Such a crime renders Beatrice silent and deprives her of the ability to expose her victimiser. As Young-Ok An observes correctly, "Beatrice knows that in the eyes of society she would be seen as suspicious collaborator in an incestuous relationship" (42). Also, the metaphor of incest as a secret that "cankers my heart's core" echoes the chains that "gangrene" Bernardo's "sweet limbs," again suggesting the dark theme of internal corruption of the innocent. By the end of Act 3 scene 1, the count's atrocities have accumulated to drive the main

actions of patricide plotted by Beatrice, Lucretia, Giacomo, and Orsino. This includes the failed first attempt on the Count's passage to the Castle of Petrella and the successful assassination during his sleep executed by his two old enemies hired by Beatrice.

In Act 4 scene 1, after escaping from his assailants' attempt on his life and safely entering the Castle of Petrella, Count Cenci reiterates his motivations for raping his daughter: to "poison and corrupt her soul" (4.1.45) and to force her to "if there be skill in hate / Die in despair" (49-50). He also plans to hurl Bernardo—another victim, whose youth, like Beatrice's sex and beauty, represents the untarnished innocent soul, into "The sepulchre of hope, where evil thoughts / Shall grow like weeds on a neglected tomb" (52-53). Here once again Shelley accentuates the nature of father-daughter incest as a form of violent assimilation and incorporation of the children into the father's evil nature. Furthermore, the count even dwells on the abhorrent possibility of Beatrice giving birth to a child as the wicked fruit of the incestuous act:

. . . May it be
A hideous likeness of herself, that as
From a distorting mirror, she may see
Her image mixed with what she most abhors,
Smiling upon her from her nursing breast.
And that the child may from its infancy
Grow, day by day, more wicked and deformed,
Turning her mother's love to misery:
And that both she and it may live until
It shall repay her care and pain with hate,
Or what may else be more unnatural,
So he may hunt her through the clamorous scoffs
Of the loud world to a dishonoured grave. (4.1.144-157)

This secret intention of the count parallels his manipulation of Giacomo's family. If the incestuous act results in a child, its appearance will mirror both herself and her father; the natural bond of mother and son will compel Beatrice to love and care for it, but its origin and its resemblance of her victimiser will force her to simultaneously abhor it. In this situation, the boundaries between self and other, love and hate, are all dissolved into a manic chaos. Thus, another duplication of irreversible antagonism between

two familial generations will be completed, which, as in the case of Giacomo, will displace Beatrice, moving her from a position of innocent victim to one of a patriarchal (though female) victimiser as her father. The last three lines quoted above—especially the references to “what may else be more unnatural” and “a dishonoured grave” even prefigure another incestuous violation, in which Beatrice is raped by her own son. Such an act echoes Milton’s design of Sin and Death in *Paradise Lost* (Potkay 59). Moreover, as Andrea K. Henderson also observes, we see in this passage “the evil of incarnation and fathering,” with which the count aims to annihilate Beatrice’s inner self by “fathering in his own child another child” (101). In all historical sources, the only account of Count Cenci’s fancy in this regard is that he “tried to persuade the poor girl, by an enormous heresy, that children born of the commerce of a father with a daughter were all saints,” as recorded by Mary Shelley in her translation.⁶² It is thus striking that Percy Shelley converts this original motivation, which seems in his sources to be a seductive account of mere lechery, to such an abhorrent extent: It is the count’s desire to recreate and perpetuate patriarchal tyrants and family antagonism.

In the analysis so far, I have explicated how Shelley’s characterisation of Count Cenci varies vastly from his sources and how the deviation brings the obscene/off-stage father-daughter incest back onto stage, suggestively serving as the embodiment of an alternative poetics of corruption and assimilation. Shelley’s formulation of the count’s motivations is ethically horrid but aesthetically powerful, reflecting the “obscene” poetics that starkly opposes the poetics of love and sympathy that Shelley delineates and champions in the *Defence*. His lines celebrating all the atrocities the count has imposed on his family further testify to the composition’s heterogeneous aesthetics of the amoral and asocial:

⁶² The record of this specific heresy spoken by the count can be found in Mary Shelley’s translation of “The Relation” in the edition of Shelley’s poetical works published by Reeves and Turner in 1886. It also appears in the Buxton Forman’s edition in 1876, but originally Mary omits it in the 1839 edition, as her footnote explains: “The details here are too horrible, and unfit for publication” (*PWS* 161). For more detailed information, see Steffan’s essay, p. 602-603.

I will pile up my silver and my gold;
My costly robes, paintings and tapestries;
My parchments and all records of my wealth,
And make a bonfire in my joy, and leave
Of my possessions nothing but my name;
Which shall be an inheritance to strip
Its wearer bare as infamy. (4.1.56-62)

Count Cenci's declaration that he will destroy all his material treasure in a bonfire of joy after he completes his scheme of corrupting Beatrice and Bernardo contrasts his embracing of material luxuries at the beginning of the play. By doing evil upon his children, he is emancipated from the restraint of the material world, where accumulation of wealth and subsistence of physical life are the primary goals. This reasoning echoes Burke's point that one of the aesthetic powers of the sublime lies in its anti-pragmatism. Also, the very mental state the count relates in this passage resonates with Bataille's idea of the sacred, a sphere in which all resources are to be squandered and all conducts of pragmatism and purposiveness are to be forsaken. The poetic power that Shelley bestows on Count Cenci lies in his absolute commitment to evil (with certain literary tinges of the Byronic hero and the eighteenth-century libertine such as Mozart's Don Giovanni) and his multi-layered motivation of assimilation and incorporation. This characterisation actually corresponds to the unconscious and the identity-annihilating aspect of poetry, which Shelley endeavours to reject as "obscenity" and to harness with his "internal morality" of selflessness, love, and sympathy in *A Defence of Poetry*.

In *The Cenci*, Beatrice initially epitomises the positive aspect of poetry, the goodness of which is best offset by her father, who similarly embodies the negative aspect of poetry. Shelley seeks to accomplish a dramatic representation of the portrait of Beatrice at the Colonna Palace, which had deeply impressed him. In the Preface he records that how his imagination and sentiments were evoked when he saw the portrait: "she seems sad and stricken down in spirit, yet the despair thus expressed is lightened by the patience of gentleness," he writes, adding, "the lips have that permanent meaning of imagination and sensibility which suffering has not repressed and

which it seems as if death scarcely could extinguish" (*MW* 318). Whether Shelley's attempt to dramatically represent Beatrice's image in the Preface—"one of the loveliest specimens of the workmanship of Nature" (318) in which "energy and gentleness dwell together without destroy one another" (319)—is successful or not remains a critical issue. Mary E. Finn argues that Shelley's *ekphrasis*, the "verbal rendering of an art object," of Beatrice's portrait is "a series of competitions over which image of Beatrice will survive" to "invent and establish a composite verbal portrait of Beatrice Cenci that will prevail as authoritative" (178). Indeed, Beatrice's lines in *The Cenci* are permeated with verbal aggressiveness after her determination for patricide. Shelley's characterisation of Beatrice in the later part of the play goes far beyond his perception of the Colonna Palace portrait described in the Preface. If Shelley wishes to establish Beatrice as a heroine embodying the positive poetics of love and sympathy based on imagination and sensibility, it is important to note that such an attempt must fail if the alternative poetics of corruption and assimilation represented by the count succeeds. I will attempt to settle this critical issue by examining the subtle interactions between Beatrice and the two assassins Olimpio and Marzio, whom she hires to murder her father.

The conversation between Beatrice, Olimpio and Marzio in Act 4 scenes 2 and 3 exemplifies Beatrice's verbal aggressiveness with certain resonances to other literary works. In scene 2, when Beatrice is assigning the murderous task, the two assassins are startled by a sudden and unknown noise. Beatrice scolds them fiercely for their response to it: "Ye conscience-stricken cravens, rock to rest. Your baby hearts" (4.2.39-40). In scene 3, Olimpio and Marzio retreat from the count's chamber with the murder left undone, because the former "dare not kill an old and sleeping man" (4.3.9) and the latter sees his own father's image in the count: "I knew it was the ghost / Of my dead father speaking through his lips, / And could not kill him" (4.3.20-22). Beatrice is again infuriated and calls them "Miserable slaves," "Base palterers," and "Cowards and traitors" (4.3.23, 26-27). "*Snatching a dagger from one of them and raising it,*" she then dismisses

words for actions (“Why do I talk?”) and, through a ferocious threat, reduces the two men from doers to inactive talkers: “Hadst thou a tongue to say, / ‘She murdered her own father,’ I must do it! / But never dream ye shall outlive him long!” (4.3.31-33). Beatrice’s lines and actions here bear a striking resemblance to those of Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare’s tragedy—a play that also explores the nature and psychological state of a hierarchy-subverting crime. The “conscience-stricken cravens” and “baby hearts” are reminiscent of Lady Macbeth’s comment in Act 1 scene 5 about her husband’s faltering ambition: “It is too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness.” Furthermore, in Beatrice’s action of “*snatching*” a dagger from one of the assassins, we almost see Lady Macbeth taking over the regicidal dagger from her husband, who dares not enter again the chamber where the murdered Duncan lies. As Leader and O’Neill point out, Beatrice’s dismissal of the assassins’ conscience as “an equivocation” that “sleeps over / A thousand daily acts disgracing men; / And when a deed where mercy insults heaven . . .” (4.3.28-29) alludes to the Porter’s lines in Act 2 scene 3 of *Macbeth* about the “equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale” (MW 758). The ambiguous nature of conscience, which Beatrice raises to chastise the two assassins for their hesitation, signifies the ironic fact that “conscience” only works when doing good is of one’s self-interest. By being determined to commit patricide as an act of vengeance, Beatrice has cast off the restraints of moral conventions and come to realise, perhaps unconsciously, the inconsistent nature of human conscience. However, her understanding at this juncture ironically echoes her father’s statement in Act 4 scene 1, where Count Cenci also claims, “Conscience! Oh, thou most insolent of lies! (4.1.177).

When the murder of the count is about to be exposed to Savella the Legate, who has come to announce the count’s arrest, Beatrice jubilantly and almost disdainfully responds to Lucretia’s fear, saying that they can easily fool the authority with “cheap astonishment” and “guiltless pride” (4.4.44-45). Moreover, she cares nothing for the consequence:

. . . The deed is done,
And what may follow now regards not me.

I am as universal as the light;
Free as the earth-surrounding air; as firm
As the world's centre. (4.4.46-50)

Leader and O'Neill note, but do not analyse in depth, the similar lines in Act 3 scene 4 of *Macbeth*, when Macbeth is informed of the death of Banquo and the escape of his son Fleance. After learning about Banquo's death, Macbeth feels "Whole as the marble, founded as the rock; / As broad and general as the casting air" (3.4.21-22). With this Shakespearean allusion, Shelley again latently juxtaposes Beatrice with the regicidal antagonist. Both are immersed in the transcendental ecstasy of murders accomplished, which make them feel they are united with the cosmological order: "the light," "the earth-surrounding air," and "the world's centre" in Beatrice's case; and "the marble," "the rock," and "the casting air" in Macbeth's. Moreover, both become the sovereigns of their own existence. For F. R. Leavis, Shelley's frequent allusions to Shakespeare in *The Cenci* confirm "the vague, generalizing externality of Shelley's rendering" (226). Patricia Hodgart also dismisses them as confusing flaws and intrusions, despite that "the creation of Beatrice is an admirable one and the action of the play well-managed" (130). By contrast, I demonstrate in the analysis above the dramatic function of the Beatrice-Macbeth correspondence that Shelley adopts. By allusively equalling Beatrice with the regicidal—and to a symbolic extent, also patricidal—Macbeth/Lady Macbeth, Shelley deprives Beatrice of her moral ground. He insinuates that her justice is not justice, instead being simply another crime. In this way, her act is also aligned with Macbeth/Lady Macbeth's crime, although the Shakespearean characters' crime is based on superstition and ambition. Therefore, Shelley utilises these poetical parallels between *The Cenci* and *Macbeth* to certify Count Cenci's success in corrupting and assimilating Beatrice through his atrocities, especially the incestuous rape.⁶³

In Act 5, Beatrice's self-defence in the trial is yet another example of

⁶³ For another detailed comparison between *The Cenci* and *Macbeth*, see D. Harrington-Lueker's 1983 essay "Imagination versus Introspection: *The Cenci* and *Macbeth*" in *Keats-Shelley Journal*.

Shelley's deviation from his source materials, and a further confirmation of Beatrice's latent identification with the count. The confrontation between Beatrice and Marzio is a dramatic extension of Mary Shelley's translated account of the interrogation: "Marzio, overcome and moved by the presence of mind and courage of Beatrice, retracted all that he had deposed at Naples, and rather than again confess, obstinately died under his torments" (*PWS* 162). In its counterpart in Act 5 scene 2 of *The Cenci*, Marzio's initial confession is moved from Naples to Rome. When Marzio discloses how Beatrice "did urge with menaces and bribes / To kill your father" (5.2.24-25) to the judge and Cardinal Camillo, Beatrice "*advances towards him*" with a threatening glare. Marzio, instead of being "moved by the presence of mind and courage of Beatrice" as Mary Shelley's text describes, is terrified by Beatrice's silent wrath: "O, dart / The terrible resentment of those eyes / On the dead earth!" (5.2.29-31). Beatrice echoes her furious reaction to Marzio's and Olimpio's fear and hesitation to carry out the murder with a curse: "never dream ye shall outlive him long!" (4.3.33). In her self-righteousness, Beatrice has unconsciously possessed her father's despotic disposition, using threats to forbid the tortured man to disclose her crime.

Marzio nevertheless confesses and, in order to address this, Beatrice defends herself in a speech that can be broken into three parts: first, a criticism of the jurisdiction relying on torture to extract false confession (5.2.39-43); second, an argument that she would be too imprudent and foolish to let Marzio—"this man, this bloody knife / With my own name engraven on the heft, / Lying unsheathed amid a world of foes, / For my own death" (98-101)—stay alive, if she was the one behind the murder; third, a lengthy appeal to Marzio that his confession would ruin both her, "Who was most pure and innocent on earth" (138), and the reputation of "our ancient house, and stainless fame" (146). The first part, in which she speaks out against a torture-based jurisdiction is a correct observation of the Inquisition. However, ironically in Beatrice's case, the confession extracted from the tortured Marzio is true: She did plot her father's death. The second part only implies that she regrets not simply killing Marzio right after the count's death

in order to silence him forever. The third part in which she urges Marzio to renounce his confession, merely demonstrates her overt self-righteousness and complete disregard for the broken man in front of her. If Shelley intends to execute, in Finn's words, an *ekphrasis* of the image of Beatrice—the one that so impresses him with “the patience of gentleness” and the “permanent meaning of imagination and sensibility” at the Colonna Palace—his endeavour is considerably undermined by how she is presented in this climactic confrontation with Marzio.

Proud, cruel, and self-righteous about her unquestionable “innocence,” the Beatrice in this scene is latently a variation of her father, who is likewise proud, cruel, and self-righteous about the evils he has done. After Beatrice's self-defence, Shelley concludes the scene following Mary Shelley's original account that Marzio is moved by Beatrice's courage, declaring that “I alone am guilty” (5.2.159) and “She is the most innocent!” (165). However, from Marzio's perspective, what he sees is a woman who uses him to accomplish her murderous goal and now throws all the guilt upon him, aggrandising herself while forsaking him. Shelley's abrupt return to the source material renders Marzio's renunciation of his testimony and self-sacrifice a forced twist that borders on absurdity. Considering Beatrice's treatment of Marzio and her problematic moral issue, Finn is correct when she concludes: “The thoughts Beatrice entertains to beget and especially to defend the act of murder are constructed and disciplined by the kind of casuistic ethic that belongs to the theological-legal tradition that has allowed Cenci to prosper” (186). In terms of resisting oppression, Shelley recognises in the Preface that “[r]evenge, retaliation, atonement, are pernicious mistakes” (*MW* 316). He embodies this pacifism by denouncing the militant Old-Testament “Demon-God” in *Queen Mab*, the nonviolent revolution in *Laon and Cythna*, and Prometheus's forgiveness of Jupiter after recalling his vengeful curse against his oppressor in *Prometheus Unbound*. In *Cenci*, Beatrice fails to exemplify this Shelleyan ideal of pacifism not only because she commits patricide as an act of vengeance, but also because her subsequent self-defence is downright self-centred and regardless of the man who serves as her

murderous instrument. On the level of aesthetics, her self-defence also deprives her of the nobility that a tragic heroine ought to possess.

In this section, I have explored Shelley's composition of *The Cenci* in relation to his source materials and other literary works. In the characterisation of the count, Shelley dwells upon Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and the Byronic hero, thus granting him charisma as considerable as Milton's Satan. With his rewriting of the count's atrocities, Shelley suggestively brings the obscene/off-stage father-daughter incest back onto stage as an essential literary and aesthetic motif of inner corruption and utter assimilation.

Shelley's frequent allusions to *Macbeth* attest to the effect of the Count's dark intent on Beatrice and her unconscious identification with her villainous father. In the climactic trial scene, Shelley further degrades the character of Beatrice in her confrontation with Marzio, rendering her both morally and aesthetically problematic. The obscene/off-stage motif of incest in *The Cenci* is beyond "pure malice" and is more than a dramatic device to justify Beatrice's patricide, as critics such as Groseclose maintain. It also differs distinctively from the incest in other literary works, especially those in the Gothic tradition. Count Cenci's incestuous desire for Beatrice is not like, for example, Manfred's sexual attempt on his *de facto* daughter, Isabella, in *The Castle of Otranto*, which signifies the obsession of heritage and lines of succession. Shelley's design of father-daughter incest is also unlike that which we encounter at the end of Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, which serves as a reader-stimulating twist to aggravate the fallen antagonist's sin. The incest motif in *The Cenci* is a unique artistic representation in English Romanticism, which generally focuses on and idealises sibling incest. Reinforced by Shelley's innovations of other atrocities with symbolic meanings, the indirect but powerful representations of father-daughter incest in *The Cenci* exemplifies the poet's latent inclination to an alternative poetics. It is empowered by hatred and violent eroticism, by which all social bonds/boundaries are dissolved. This is a clear diversion from the positive poetics based on love and sympathy that Shelley espouses in *A Defence of Poetry* and other major works, and which Beatrice fails to represent in this

tragedy. The next section focuses on *Laon and Cythna*, a poem containing what is widely regarded as “positive” sibling incest. In it, I examine Shelley’s erotic poetics of suffering and madness—represented by the motifs of torture, cannibalism, rape, and pregnancy—as another “obscene” aesthetic phenomenon in Shelley’s poetic corpus.

THE EROTIC POETICS OF SUFFERING AND MADNESS IN *LAON AND CYTHNA*

Laon and Cythna, Or The Revolution of the Golden City: A Vision of the Nineteenth Century in the Stanza of Spenser was written and published in 1817 before an immediate retraction by the publisher, Charles Ollier. Upon Shelley’s revisions, it was republished as *The Revolt of Islam* in 1818. It is Shelley’s attempt to represent the process of the French Revolution from its birth, to its decay, and to its ultimate failure. Though set in a fictional Eastern city, Argolis, that is based on “Constantinople & modern Greece,” the poem is “a tale illustrative of such a Revolution as might be supposed to take place in an European nation” (LS 1.563). In this epic, Shelley seeks to counter the pessimism pervading “the temper of the public mind” (CPWS 99) towards the bloody consequences of the French Revolution and to rekindle hope for envisioning a better future. To contain the “sanguine eagerness for good” and wipe out the “infectious gloom” that was overshadowing literary works during the post-Revolution period, Shelley assigns the task of leading the revolution to a couple of young lovers, who are also brother and sister. The ceaseless warring state between the young and the old is a Romantic trope initiated by Blake’s antithesis between the Old Testament father-god and the New Testament son-Christ. It is an important element in Shelley’s epic that will reappear in the later *The Cenci*, as analysed in the previous section. Also, the revolution being led by a young couple represents Shelley’s rejection of the reactionary ideologies espoused by the first-generation Romantics, especially Wordsworth.⁶⁴ If designating a young couple as the leaders of

⁶⁴ Both W. A. Ulmer and J. Andrew Hubbell highlight Shelley’s response to Wordsworth’s *The Excursion* in *Laon and Cythna*. The former underscores Shelley’s criticism of his great precursor’s retreat to nature (and the Christian ideology behind it) as a self-centred and self-aggrandising “sublime egotism”; the latter considers the love between Laon and Cythna as a major impetus for revolution, which is a refutation of Wordsworth’s division of the private and

revolution is a symbolic rebellion against the ancien régime and anti-revolutionary conservatism, the sibling incest between Laon and Cythna can be deemed a further undermining of the social conventions behind political and religious systems, which Shelley calls “Custom’s hydra brood” (1.33.419) and “the serpent Custom’s tooth” (8.27.3439). It is an exemplification of the positively-represented and conventional sibling incest in English Romanticism. However, as a morally controversial issue, incest also constitutes one of the two major reasons for the epic’s immediate retraction by the publisher (the other being Shelley’s constant attacks on Christianity).

In Shelley’s view, Ollier’s withdrawal of the publication was presumptive and self-defeating.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, upon Ollier’s insistence Shelley revised the poem for a second publication and retitled it *The Revolt of Islam*, though the extent of his revisions to this four-thousand-line epic is exceedingly minor. Regarding the issue of sibling incest, the revisions comprise no more than “some alterations which consist in little else than the substitution of the words *friend* or *lover* for that of *brother & sister*” (LS 1.582). Compared with the revisions respecting religion, it is obvious that Shelley is not nearly so concerned with the impact and danger provoked by incest as he is with what may be incurred by his scepticism about Christianity—one which prompts him to border on atheism.⁶⁶ The substitutions of “brother” and “sister” certainly do not remove the incestuous implications but rather generate more room for the reader’s imagination to fill in the gaps. Categorically dissatisfied with the revisions, John Taylor Coleridge (not Robert Southey, as Shelley first suspected) wrote a searing review of *The Revolt of Islam* in the 1819 April issue of *The Quarterly Review*, saying that by revising the poem Shelley “has reproduced the same poison, a little, and but a little, more cautiously disguised, and it is thus intended only to do the more mischief at less

the public.

⁶⁵ In a letter to Ollier written in December 1817, Shelley said: “You do your best to condemn my book before it is given forth, because you publish it, and then withdraw, so that no other bookseller will publish it, because one has already rejected it” (LS 580).

⁶⁶ As Frederick L. Jones, notes, of all forty-three passages that Shelley modifies for the second publication, only eight are related to the sibling incest. The rest of them all concern religion (LS 582).

personal risk to the author” (461).

In both the hostile *Quarterly* review and Leigh Hunt’s 1819 defending article in *The Examiner*, the major debates centre on religion and politics. Incest is merely taken as a piece of evidence of Shelley’s alleged proposal for political anarchy and atheism. During the period from 1817 to 1818, when the poem was written and published, England was undergoing a series of political struggles between the government and radical reformers (Grimes 98). Shelley’s fierce attacks on political and religious authorities easily attracted attention from the conservatives, as had his earlier poem *Queen Mab* in 1813. Coleridge’s 1819 *Quarterly* review focuses mainly on Shelley’s hostility toward governmental institutions and Christian belief. In it, he criticises the poet for paralleling an oriental tyranny with the British government, as well as for espousing a very vague idea of “Love” as a replacement of faith and the law. In his response to the review in *The Examiner*, Hunt defends Shelley’s radicalism: “Mr. Shelley has theories, as we have said before, with regard to the regulation of society, very different certainly from those of the Quarterly Reviewers, and very like opinions which have been held by some of the greatest and best men, ancient and modern” (653).

In *The Quarterly Review*, Coleridge views the incest in *Laon and Cythna* as one of the delinquent results of Shelley’s proposed reformed world—one without “civil institutions and religious creeds” (463-464). Through this proposal, Coleridge argues, Shelley “has invaded the purity and chilled the unsuspecting ardour of our fireside intimacies” (469). Coleridge does not inspect the sibling incest in *Laon and Cythna* in either a larger poetic context or in terms of any symbolic meaning. Instead, he only addresses it in order to discredit Shelley as a decent person: “Mr. Shelley is a very vain man” (469). Countering this, Hunt writes: “Failing in the attempt to refute Mr. Shelley’s philosophy, the Reviewers attack his private life” (652). Thus, the contemporary criticisms of the sibling incest generally centre on its connection with Shelley himself, whose life the critics infamously juxtapose with Byron’s and Hunt’s, whose alleged sexual libertinism is also tinged with

incestuous desire (Donovan 69). As Alan Richardson points out, the incest motif in literature has become a flourishing topic in literary studies in the twentieth century. With the help of modern theorists such as James George Frazer, Sigmund Freud, and Claude Levi-Strauss, researchers are no longer confined to biographical scope and are free to examine incest in literature using a range of approaches (Richardson, "The Danger of Sympathy" 737-738). Shelley's design of sibling incest in *Laon and Cythna* is no exception; a practice beginning in the twentieth century, the epic is now often examined in relation to the poet's ideals of individuality, interpersonal affection, and social reality.

As I referenced in the previous section, Thorslev notes the division between sibling incest and parent-child incest in the Romantic works, proposing that the former represents an ideal form of human affection, while the latter stands for patriarchal oppression. Affirming the importance of the incest motif in English Romanticism, Alan Richardson illustrates that the Romantic sibling incest accentuates the shared life experience "that unites the couple through countless mutual associations built up during the most idyllic stage of life" ("The Dangers of Sympathy" 739). Therefore, it is in essence different from the incest in Gothic tradition, which is generally predestined and fatalistic. Richardson argues that the incestuous love in *Laon and Cythna*, like Byron's *Manfred*, is an extension of Wordsworth's affection for Dorothy in *The Prelude*—it emblematises the Romantic hero's identification with his female counterpart. In a different essay, Richardson further argues that such male identification with his intimate female partner is a form of gender incorporation and colonialism of the feminine, one which fortifies the Romantic male subjectivity ("Colonization of the Feminine" 15-20). Several critics draw on this concept of identification to interpret the sibling incest in Shelley's poem. Richard Cronin perceives that Shelley, in his essay entitled "On Love," regards narcissism as the origin of love; Cronin goes further to say that the "likeness" between Laon and Cythna becomes the "condition of the consummation" that brings forth "an ecstatic moment in which recognition of the self becomes indistinguishable from recognition of

the other” (63). Teddi Lynn Chichester extends the idea of identification by tracing Shelley’s childhood, which was shared with his sisters in Field Place. She then demonstrates how Laon’s love for Cythna represents Shelley’s personal longing to return to such a pastoral and harmonious realm. She highlights the symbolic meanings of Laon’s physical and mental suffering in the poem as a trial of feminisation, “an exercise in imaginative transsexualism” (86), to annul his masculine inclination toward violence. Adding to the above interpretations, Hugh Roberts sees the incestuous love in the poem “as both sceptical disruption of the customary forms of marital relationship and as the complete and more perfect realization of the unifying, therapeutic, promise of marriage” (183).

As aforementioned, the sibling incest in *Laon and Cythna* is the critical focuses of many previous studies. In light of this, in addition to revisiting the incestuous consummation narrated in Canto 6, I will connect its erotic connotations to several episodes in the poem that are relatively less noted in existing critical scholarship. These episodes contain two common motifs: suffering and madness. They include Laon’s cannibalistic vision in his tormenting captivity in Canto 3, his potentially sexual encounter with the mysterious woman Pestilence in Canto 6, and Cythna’s description of her pregnancy and madness in her confinement in Canto 7. Therefore, this section will not only focus on Shelley’s design of sibling incest—ostensibly the opposition to the father-daughter incest in his later play *The Cenci*—but also on Laon’s and Cythna’s mental transformations, incurred by suffering and madness, that parallel both their incestuous love and the process of revolution. I will argue that even though the sibling incest between the title characters is a positive form of Romantic sexuality and one of the most powerful epitomes of the Shelleyan sympathy, in *Laon and Cythna* Shelley still employs the “obscene” poetics of self-annihilation in the episodes that I mention above. Moreover, on the level of aesthetics, such a poetics outweighs Shelley’s efforts to pursue his political ideal, which is represented in a highly didactic and repetitive manner. Before I begin the major discussion, beginning in Canto 3, I will briefly summarise the previous cantos

and offer interpretations of the incest motif therein as it relates to my major argument.

The poem opens with a fourteen-stanza canto dedicated to Mary Shelley, in which Percy Shelley recounts his idyllic childhood, his unhappy years at Eton, his life of love with Mary, and his loss of custody of the two children he had with Harriet Westbrook in May 1817. With this prefacing canto Shelley summons his personal experiences to prefigure the personal and interpersonal crisis that Laon and Cythna encounter in the epic. By doing so, Shelley also extends the scope to social and political contexts, delineating his purpose to “shake the Anarch Custom’s reign” (10.86) and to “look from our tranquillity / Like lamps into the world’s tempestuous night” (14.122-123).⁶⁷

The main narrative of *Laon and Cythna* starts with “a monstrous sight” in Canto 1, that is, with “An Eagle and a Serpent wreathed in fight” (1.8.191-193).⁶⁸ The fierce contest between an eagle and a snake had already appeared in *Alastor*, published in 1816. In this earlier poem, the nameless Poet (who stands for Wordsworth’s self-excluding solitude from the human world) is wandering and pining in the sphere of Nature, where “the bright arch of rainbow clouds / And pendent mountains seen in the calm lake” only

⁶⁷ Though this canto is not related to the plot, Shelley’s self-reference as a “Knight of Faery” in service of a “Queen” seems to prefigure a narrative of medieval chivalry and corresponds to the form of Spenserian stanza employed in the epic. But, the “adventures” that Shelley undergoes and relays in the following cantos are nothing like the heroic deeds of slaying a dragon or rescuing a damsel in distress. The personal ordeals Shelley presents herein signify the physical and mental tests the protagonists endure in *Laon and Cythna*. Shelley’s recollection of the patriarchal oppression at Eton, “The harsh and grating strife of tyrants and of foes” (“To Mary” 3.27), foreshadows Othman’s despotic rule in the Golden City of Argolis. Shelley’s implication of losing the custody of his children with Harriet in the eighth stanza, as Leader and O’Neil point out, perhaps also predicts Cythna’s daughter being taken away from her after birth, described in Canto 7. He learns from these painful experiences not to resort to violent resistance. His is a lesson in nonviolence: “I will be wise, / And just, and free, and mild” and “I then controlled / My tears, my heart grew calm, and I was meek and bold” (4.31-32, 36). Mildness/meekness and forgiveness were ostensible feminine qualities in the nineteenth-century social context, but they were also the virtues that a Christ-figure possesses in the face of oppression (Chichester 81). Shelley’s belief in this New Testament all-loving ideology—“Let scorn be not repaid with scorn” (9.76)—foreshadows Laon’s conversion from martial retaliation to nonviolent revolution led by Cythna, and the Prometheus that combines certain Christ-propensities in the later *Prometheus Unbound*.

⁶⁸ Starting from Canto 1, the text of *Laon and Cythna* will be referenced by canto, stanza, and line numbers in parenthesis cited from *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 2, edited by Neville Rogers.

evoke “loathliest vapours hung” and “the foul grave” (213-217). There he is disturbed by “a distempered dream” (225) of a struggle between an eagle and a serpent. In this episode of *Alastor*, the highly erotic eagle-serpent image represents a nocturnal unrest that is stirred by sexual desire and is the vicious result of the Poet’s self-alienation from humanity: “As an eagle grasped / In folds of the green serpent, feels her breast / Burn with the poison, and precipitates / Through night and day” (227-230). In Canto 1 of *Laon and Cythna*, Shelley once again employs the eagle-serpent image. However, in this poem he enlarges its scope, transforming it from the metaphorical to the allegorical. This is immediately observable in the way in which Shelley capitalises both “Eagle” and “Serpent,” in contrast to their lower-case counterparts in *Alastor*. Set in the context of natural turmoil, of sublime grandeur and terror, the eagle-serpent war signifies Shelley’s Manichean dualistic world view: “Two Powers o’er mortal things dominion hold / Ruling the world with a divided lot” (1.25.347-348). The serpent, originally an image of evil and temptation in the biblical context, becomes more ambiguous in the Romantic works and is sometimes even portrayed positively. Politically, the image of serpent was flown on a banner of the American Revolution, the Gadsden flag, accompanied by the defiant line, “Don’t tread on me.” And, as part of the Romantic re-evaluation of the Bible, the serpent/Satan stood for sexual liberation against religious repression. In this “portentous fight” that foretells the future revolution, Shelley regards the Serpent as a representative of good. But the Serpent’s eventual defeat by the Eagle also hints at the failure which, in Shelley’s view, is inevitable when violence is part of a revolutionary process.

The defeated and wounded Serpent is tended by a nameless Woman, “fair as one flower adorning / An icy wilderness” (1.16.264-265). As the Woman “unveiled her bosom,” the Serpent lies “coiled in rest in her embrace” (1.20.302, 306). Here we can observe a hidden identification of the Serpent with Laon, who is also cared for and healed by a Hermit after he is captured and tortured by Othman’s soldiers.⁶⁹ Chichester contends that the Serpent

⁶⁹ In Stanza 22 the narrator asks: “Shall this fair woman all alone, / Over the sea with that

represents a latent “Shelleyan self-image.” The Serpent, like Laon in Canto 4, must annihilate its masculine fierceness, reflecting Shelley’s aspiration to return to the feminine garden in Field Place with his sisters. By the end of Canto 1, Shelley presents an incorporation of the Serpent and the Woman, who become “a Form, / Fairer than tongue can speak or thought may frame” and “sate / Majestic, yet most mild—calm, yet compassionate (1.57.632-633, 639-638). Such is the androgynous image in Shelley’s ideal that combines both masculine and feminine qualities, a perfect union of both sexes.⁷⁰ This episode of eagle-serpent fight and serpent-woman union establishes the essential Shelleyan concept of revolution in *Laon and Cythna* that reflects the French Revolution: its doomed failure for abuse of violence, the necessity to temper such masculine aggressiveness, and the possible vision of successful revolution based on gender-dissolving love and sympathy.

Shelley’s development of the eagle-serpent image, from *Alastor* to Canto 1 of *Laon and Cythna*, shows his understanding that all human interactions, encompassing social and political conflicts, originate in a sexual drive that is itself contained and categorised by gender differences in society. Shelley’s aspiration to an ideal social reform based allegorically on an androgynous image echoes Blake’s concept of “human form divine,” the re-integration of the split human mentalities and the reunion of the masculine “Spectre” and the feminine “Emanation.” Therefore, we can expect to see in *Laon and Cythna* a certain alleviation and even degradation of masculinity in the late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century social and aesthetic contexts. Chichester insightfully terms Shelley’s rendering of Laon’s masculinity as “imaginative transsexuality,” through which Shelley “envisions in *Laon and Cythna* a vital sisterhood of love, community, and self-sacrifice that evades and even subverts the ‘brotherhood of ill’ which the patriarchal

fierce Serpent go? / His head is on her heart, and who can know / How soon he may devour his feeble prey?” (1.22.318-321). The Serpent’s pronoun becomes “he” rather than the previous “it,” further stressing its identification with Laon.

⁷⁰ This perfect androgynous form, as we might note, is still a “He,” attesting to Anne K. Mellor’s and Alan Richardson’s arguments that the Romantics and their heroes do not truly dissolve gender difference, but only assimilate the feminine to solidify their own male subjectivity.

tyrant Othman creates" (100). Drawing on Chichester's argument, I seek to further point out that Shelley achieves this sexual transformation with an erotic poetics of suffering and madness that again borders on an "obscene" annihilation of the Romantic selfhood and subjectivity.

Canto 2 presents the primary innocence of Laon's cohabitation with Cythna in an idyllic bower, which reflects Shelley's own childhood in Field Place. In this Canto Shelley establishes the incest setting for his protagonists. For instance, in Stanza 20 Laon declares, "I had a little sister, whose fair eyes / Were lodestars of delight, which drew me home" and who is his "only source of tears and smiles" (2.21.847-848, 855). In Stanza 25, Shelley describes Cythna as a "child of twelve years old" (2.25.885), a specific age that reminds us of Ololon, the "Virgin of twelve years" in Blake's *Milton*. The twelve-year-old signifies the initiation of female puberty as well as the capacity for sexual interactions with men, as discussed in the previous chapter. Cythna's age here implies her awareness of sexual difference and the new identity based on it, confirming her erotic relationship with Laon. In the republished *The Revolt of Islam*, "a little sister" is changed to "An orphan" and "a playmate," who lives with Laon's parents, but Cythna's identity as Laon's "own shadow" and "A second self, far dearer and more fair" (2.24.874-875) remains unaltered. Therefore, despite his modifications of nouns, Shelley still underscores the sibling incestuous love as a form of utter identification and incorporation.

The idyllic setting of Canto 2 is a nursing bower, which provides space for the couple's incestuous love to grow. Here, Laon lies in "her smile-peopled rest" (2.34.970) with "the female mind / Untainted by the poison-clouds which rest / On the dark world" (2.35.973-975). In this protective and harmonious realm, they still perceive the human suffering in the external world. Shelley begins to extend the scope of sexual love between the protagonists to a broader sense of sympathy, when Cythna "had endued / My purpose with a wider sympathy" and together they lament "the servitude / In which the half of humankind were mewed" (2.36.983-984, 985-986). Laon further observes, "Never will peace and human nature meet / Till free and

equal man and woman greet / Domestic peace" (2.37.994-996). Here Shelley prefigures the idea of gender equality, which derives also from the siblings' incestuous love as a form of identification, as the crucial element in his ideal social reform. We see Shelley's development of sibling incest from love between individuals, to the idealised representation of gender equality, and to universal sympathy for all of humankind. Although the primary pastoral paradise in which Laon and Cythna develop their love nurtures the idea of Shelleyan sympathy, they are bound to leave this unearthly place behind to actualise Shelleyan sympathy in the mundane world. They must sever their bound with this natural bower of nurturing maternity, as Jesus must declare to his mother: "What have I to do with thee?" They must part, only to meet again not in "yon cold vacant Heaven" but "Within the minds of men, whose lips shall bless / Our memory, and whose hopes its light retain / When these dissevered bones are trodden in the plain" (2.48.1095-1098). Here, Shelley emphasises Laon's and Cythna's destined entrance into the real world, which is opposed to Wordsworthian self-centred solitude in nature and alienation from human beings (which he criticises in *Alastor*). Such unhealthy espousal of solitude, as Peacock observes in *Alastor*, is "a spirit of evil," (qtd. in Leader's and O'Neill's note, *MW* 716), which will degrade nature to "the deaf air" and "the blind earth, and heaven / That echoes not my thoughts" (*Alastor* 289-290). Incestuous love, originally a social taboo, the prohibition of which guarantees familial structure and thus entire human civilisation, becomes in Shelley's poem "a symbol of interpersonal unity" (Roberts 182) and the basis of positive human drive. Through it, Shelley can re-enter and ameliorate society and civilisation.

At the end of Canto 2, after acknowledging their task to expand the scope of their love and take it into the outside world, Laon and Cythna do not actually intend to leave their bucolic bower immediately. They are "calm with passion" and "moved towards our home; where, in this mood, / Each from the other sought refuge in solitude" (2.49.1104, 1106-1107). The oxymoronic "calm with passion" suggests their inability to act in human society, and the final line of Canto 2 ironically evokes the Wordsworthian "self-centred

seclusion" (Preface to *Alastor*, MW 92) in nature, the "refuge in solitude" that Shelley has reproached in *Alastor*. The incident that truly drives Shelley's protagonists into the outer world is the violent intrusion of Othman, the tyrant of the Golden City. In Laon's dream vision that starts Canto 3, Shelley again presents the similar nocturnal unrest of sexual desire seen in *Alastor*, as Laon experiences in his sleep "a boundless chaos wild and vast" of "rapture sick" and "pain aghast" (3.1.1113, 1116).⁷¹ Laon's mental unrest contrasts with the natural harmony surrounding him and Cythna and himself, suggesting that inactive pleasure in natural beauty prevents them from actualising their love in worldly revolution. It also foreshadows the first main action of the plot that will drive the couple from their idyllic garden: Cythna's abduction by Othman's soldiers.

The malevolent and sexual vision that disturbs Laon's dream in Stanza 5—"the gaping earth then vomited / Legions of foul and ghastly shapes, which hung / Upon my flight; and ever, as we fled, / They plucked at Cythna" (3.5.1148-1151)—becomes reality when the couple's cottage is invaded by Othman's soldiers, "whose glittering swords were bare, / And whose degraded limbs the tyrant's garb did wear" (3.6.1161-1162). After witnessing Cythna's seizure by the enemies, Laon draws his knife and "with one impulse, suddenly / All unaware three of their number slew" (3.10.1194-1195). He does this even though Cythna has urged him not to resort to violence. This episode is one of the most crucial moments of the entire epic. In terms of narrative, it brings the couple out of their bower of nature and into the human world. It also initiates a series of trials they must undergo to achieve Shelley's revolutionary ideal. Critics also accentuate the psychosexual significance of Laon's martial action here. Stuart M. Sperry argues that this scene "reveals much of Shelley's intuitive understanding of

⁷¹ We can also note that Laon's highly sexual vision, one that blends pleasure with pain is "never memory's theme" (3.1.1114). Shelley emphasises that Laon's vision does not belong to "memory" because his unrest is associated with his future, which lies outside the natural paradise that presently harbours him. Here Shelley also evokes the Romantic understanding of "memory" as the negative opposition to artistic inspiration, an antithesis that Blake also recognises, especially in the Preface to *Milton*: "the Daughters of Memory shall become the Daughters of Inspiration" (CPPB 95).

the human psyche, that aggression is the inevitable outgrowth of masculinity” (“The Sexual Theme” 41). W. A. Ulmer interprets Laon’s vision of Cythna’s assault and the later realised action of it as a “psychomachia where Laon plays all the roles” (59). Chichester argues that Laon’s dream vision “has materialized as the phallic weapons that both Laon and the soldiers wield” (91). Their readings suggest that Laon’s violent resistance makes him unconsciously identify with the masculine oppression that Othman represents. Such aggressiveness and retaliation are negative masculine propensities that derail the French Revolution and that Laon has to eliminate in order to re-join Cythna in the Golden City to lead a peaceful resistance. After Cythna is taken away from him, Laon has to undergo tortures at the hand of Othman’s henchmen before being rescued and healed by the nameless Hermit. Through these experiences Laon gradually tempers the masculine aggressiveness of his male psyche.

Knocked into unconsciousness, Laon is taken by Othman’s minions to “a cavern in the hill” (3.13.1216) and bound “to the platform of the pile . . . / With chains which eat into the flesh, alas, / With brazen links” (3.14.1225-1230). In this plight, Laon feels that “The darkness of brief frenzy cast on me, / So that I knew not my own misery” (3.15.1237-1238) and “the peace of madness” (3.17.1252). After seeing the boat that carries Cythna away “to her blighting slavery sold” (3.17.1259), Laon suffers from the biting chains, and subsequently from thirst and hunger: “I chewed the bitter dust, / And bit my bloodless arm, and licked the brazen rust” (3.21.1295-1296). On the fourth day, the physical suffering begin to invade Laon’s mentality, as he experiences:

. . . A fearful sleep,
Which through the caverns dreary and forlorn
Of the riven soul, sent its foul dreams to sweep
With whirlwind swiftness—a fall far and deep,—
A gulf, a void, a sense of senselessness— (3.22.1328-1302)

This mental chaos brings forth “a choir of devils” to “supply those ceaseless revels” (3.23.1307, 1310) in Laon’s dream vision. In this episode, Shelley casts Laon in a Promethean image of physical suffering, and presents his psychological reactions to extreme bodily affliction. Shelley frequently

deploys oxymoronic phrases such as “the peace of madness” and “a sense of senselessness,” which indicate the breaking of boundaries between extreme opposites. The oxymoron signifies the deactivation of Laon’s human faculties to interpret and to categorise objects, in this case his own emotions. The deactivation also results in his failed perception to distinguish reality from dream: “thought could not divide / The actual world from these entangling evils” (3.23.1311-1312). Consequently, his subjectivity borders on disintegration, as confirmed by his “riven soul,” as well as by his recollection that “I descried / All shapes like mine own self hideously multiplied” (3.23.1313-1314). Moreover, considering Shelley’s depiction of Laon’s experiences of pain and violence—his ominous dream vision and his mentality in the abduction scene—we find more erotically-tinged phrases, such as “rapture sick” and “brainless ecstasy,” which echoes his “terrific trance” in this agonising captivity. Casting Laon in an agonised Promethean/Jesus image but imbued with eroticism, Shelley’s poetics of suffering and madness is a unique representation of the disruption of human psyche in extreme conditions, when a human subject is unable to differentiate sanity from madness, reality from dream, pain from pleasure, and self from non-self.⁷² The mental condition also parallels Nietzsche’s Dionysian intoxication, a state in which *principium individuationis*, the human capability to differentiate, categorise, and interpret objects, is suspended.

In Laon’s final dream vision of this manic pligh, when “The sense of day and night, of false and true, / Was dead within me” (3.24.1315-1316), Shelley presents an even more shocking image of cannibalism:

Methought that grate was lifted, and the seven
 Who brought me thither four stiff corpses bare,
 And from the frieze to the four winds of Heaven
 Hung them on high by the entangled hair:
 Swarthy were three—the fourth was very fair:
 As they retired, the golden moon upsprung,
 And eagerly, out in the giddy air,

⁷² Also, with the synthesis of bodily pain, religiosity, and eroticism in this passage, Shelley predates Bataille’s famous remark on the photograph of Chinese torture “Hundred Pieces,” in which the victim’s body is cut piece by piece slowly. For Bataille, the photograph is “at once ecstatic and intolerable” and illustrates “a fundamental connection between religious ecstasy and eroticism—and in particular sadism” (*The Tears of Eros* 206).

Leaning that I might eat, I stretched and clung
Over the shapeless depth in which those corpses hung.

(3.25.1324-1332)

The three “swarthy” corpses can be easily identified as the three soldiers Laon slays in the abduction scene. However, the fourth one, “A woman’s shape, now lank and cold and blue, / The dwelling of the many-coloured worm” (3.26.1333-1334), is Cythna herself: “it seemed that Cythna’s ghost / Laughed in those looks, and that the flesh was warm / Within my teeth” (3.26.1338-1340). Critics have paid much attention to Laon’s vision, which simultaneously transgresses a number of the severest taboos in Shelley’s contemporary social context: cannibalism, necrophagy, homosexuality, and incest. E. B. Murray calls this scene Shelley’s “Gothic extravagance” (573). Sperry deems it a Freudian projection of Laon’s sexual desire for Cythna as his loved object for assimilation (“The Sexual Theme” 42). Ulmer argues that the vision is a warning to Laon of “the horror of aggression” that is “a precondition for sexual enjoyment of the woman” and would “turn him to a saving pacifism” (60-61). Chichester regards Laon’s eating of Cythna’s dead flesh as the “communion at a new altar, where (Christlike) woman reigns supreme” (92). The event is that which leads him to revive “his absent/dead sister” and “her spirit within himself” (92). Both Ulmer and Chichester recognise Laon’s cannibalistic vision as a necessary epiphany for him to regret his previous resort to violence, which might also doom Cythna eventually. Hence, it functions to annihilate the last residue of Laon’s aggressive masculinity so that he can reunite with Cythna in the nonviolent revolution that will follow. As Chichester concludes, it also symbolises Shelley’s desire to re-identify with the sorority of his childhood, spent in Field Place.

More than a positive symbolic transition from masculinity/violence to femininity/pacifism as Ulmer and Chichester propose, Shelley’s design of Laon’s cannibalistic vision retains the poetics of disruption, which was also seen in Laon’s earlier suffering and madness. Laon sees the fourth corpse as a female, “lank and cold and blue,” who has a “the white and hollow cheek.” Yet, what make him recognise her as Cythna are her “radiance” and “horny

eyes" (26.1333-1337). Once again Shelley's oxymoronic descriptions of Cythna's corpse as simultaneously "cold and blue" and full of "radiance" and "warm" blur the boundary between life and death, and furthermore insinuates the affinity between death and eroticism. The significance of this episode is that cannibalism as a cultural and literary motif in Shelley's time was a means to distinguish civilisation and barbarity, to alienate the cultural otherness and solidify the subjectivity of the Western civilisation. As Kilgour points out, cannibalism functions to "accuse a minority that resists assimilation into the body politics of that body's own desire for total incorporation" (5). This ideological phenomenon, as Kilgour further argues, is certified by the accusation of Jewish cannibalism in the Middle Ages, of the Catholic cannibalism during the Reformation, and of the aboriginal cannibalism in the New World at the height of imperialism and colonialism. Kilgour also notes that cannibalism is contained in the Christian idea of communion, suggesting that the boundary between the civilisation represented by Christian Europe and the barbarity of the New World is sometimes easily blurred. In Laon's case, Shelley audaciously employs the motif of cannibalism upon his protagonist, a white European hero who first cannibalises three "swarthy" foreigners out of desperate hunger, and then cannibalises his sister in a highly erotic manner. Recalling the etymological affinity between "consume" and "consummate" pointed out by Kilgour, we can observe the connection between incest and cannibalism, which we have already seen in *The Cenci*. In this visionary episode, Shelley on the one hand subverts the division and hierarchy between civilisation/Europe and barbarity/non-Europe at the level of contemporary cultural context; on the other hand, he eroticises the religious rite of communion with incestuous connotations because in this vision, as Chichester proposes, Cythna is supposed to represent the idea of pity and self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Once again Shelley echoes Bataille's idea of *l'érotisme sacré*, with which "the religious horror disclosed in sacrifice becomes linked to the abyss of eroticism" (*Erotism* 207).

What follows Laon's cannibalistic vision is another vision of "The shape of an old man" that replaces his previous horrible dream. The vision is soon

realised when the Hermit appears and rescues Laon from the rocky platform at the end of Canto 3. Laon's time spent with the Hermit in Canto 4 is another process of tempering his masculinity. The Hermit, as Mary Shelley notes, is modelled on Dr James Lind, Shelley's mentor at Eton. Roberts argues that the character is also modelled on William Godwin and Thomas Paine, "the past heroes of '90s radicalism'" (170). As Chichester points out, the figure also represents the idea that "even the most muscular and 'giant' representative of the male sex can exemplify feminine qualities" (92). Indeed, Shelley's description of the Hermit, who tenderly takes care of Laon and heals his wounds, is full of the paradoxical combination of the masculine and the feminine; he is "Statelily and beautiful" (3.27.1349), "so grand and mild" (3.33.1401); he has "sweet and mighty eloquence" (4.11.1505) and "soft looks of pity" that can dart "A glance as keen as is the lightning's stroke" (4.6.1465-1466). The Hermit not only takes on a mother's role by demonstrating his nurturing and healing ability but also stands up against the institution of marriage, which is traditionally centred on and empowered by the father.⁷³ In Stanza 18, he informs Laon of the peaceful revolution led by a mysterious lady, who is later revealed as Cythna, in the Golden City. Upon hearing the Hermit's account of how "a maiden fair . . . arise[s], and make[s] / Her sex the law of truth and freedom hear" (4.18.1570-1573), Laon learns to employ the gentle power of language instead of using brute force: "great is the strength / Of words" (4.18.1569-1570). Indeed, all the oppressed people "bend beneath the spell / Of that young maiden's speech" (4.20.1592-1593). This is in opposition to the traditional understanding that word and speech, associated with females, are powerless tools for handling serious matters, while actions, taken by males, are the best means to heroic feats. In the interaction between the Hermit and Laon, Shelley presents the former as a

⁷³ In his self-introduction, the Hermit tells Laon that inspired by his writings, the "marriageable maidens, who have pined / With love, till life seemed melting through their look, / A warmer zeal, a nobler hope, now find" (4.13.1526-1528). Shelley's lines here resemble Blake's in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*: "The virgin / That pines for man; shall awaken her womb to enormous joys / In the secret shadows of her chamber" (CPPB 50). Through the Hermit Shelley promotes the liberation of sexual desire from the regulation of marriage, as does Blake against the virtue of chastity, though Shelley presents such a liberation in a more sublimated form rather than Blake's direct bodily description.

heterogeneous father-figure, who subverts the archetype of patriarch in the Christian tradition (deriving from the Old Testament Jehovah) to inspire Laon to incorporate feminine qualities. By acquainting himself with these feminine qualities from the Hermit's motherly care and teaching, Laon passes another stage of alleviating his masculine aggressiveness.⁷⁴

After leaving the Hermit's tower with "blooming ivy-trails," "the spangling sands," and "rarest sea shells" (4.1.1416-1419)—another variation of the Shelleyan bower of maternal nature—Laon arrives at the Golden City to aid the revolution, girded with a new belief in nonviolent reformation. His conversion to pacifism is soon proved when he stops a fight between the rebels and Othman's soldiers by throwing himself at a thrusting spear:

One pointed on his foe the mortal spear—
I rushed before its point, and cried 'Forbear, forbear!'
The spear transfixed my arm that was uplifted
In swift expostulation, and the blood
Gushed round its point" (5.8.1790-5.9.1794).

By receiving a phallic spear, Laon puts himself in both the feminine position of the penetrated and in the role of self-sacrificing Christ, for he "takes the punishment for the sins of others and serves thereby to absolve them of their crimes" (Roberts 189).⁷⁵ After the successful revolution, Laon meets the now dethroned Othman in the palace, where he sees a girl beside the tyrant. This girl "stood beside him like a rainbow braided" with "A sweet and solemn smile, like Cythna's cast" (5.24.1927-1930). Though Laon does not know she is the child brought forth by Cythna after being raped by Othman, he feels nameless affinity with her and "with a father's kiss / I pressed those softest eyes in trembling tenderness" (5.24.1934-1935).

Shelley's casting of Laon as a Christ figure becomes pronounced when the furious multitude demands a trial for the deposed Othman: "He who

⁷⁴ However, there are also negative connotations in the Hermit's benign characterisation, as "That hoary man had spent his livelong age / In converse with the dead, who leave the stamp / Of ever-burning thoughts on many a page, / When they are gone into the senseless damp / Of graves" (4.8.1477-1481). Roberts observes in his history that "The old Hermit 'feeds' on the dead to become like them...with a thanatological cannibalism of the past" (171).

⁷⁵ Chichester notes this as another degradation Laon's masculinity, though she argues that "his strident claims to self-abnegation somewhat undermine his credibility as an embodiment of sympathetic love" (95).

judged let him be brought / To judgment! blood for blood cries from the soil / On which his crimes have deep pollution wrought!" (5.32.1999-2001). Shelley almost repeats the very scene in Chapter 8 of the Gospel of John in the New Testament, in which the scribes and Pharisees sentence an adulterous woman to be stoned to death. Laon dissuades the crowd from violence against Othman, saying a line that clearly alludes to Jesus's famous phrase, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at him" (John 8:7): "Is there one who ne'er / In secret thought has wished another's ill" (5.34.2018). Moved by Laon's speech, the people "kissed my feet / In pity's madness" (5.35.2031-2032) and even comfort the distressed Othman by allowing him to live freely in a mansion resembling his previous palace. Apparently, such a result of the revolution accords with Shelley's purpose to envision the *beau ideal* of the French Revolution. That is, the state is "relieved by milder pictures of friendship & love & natural affection" (LS 564) after the despotic regime is peacefully overthrown. The despot himself is forgiven and cared for rather than abused and executed by his people, as Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were. However, Shelley's attitude to this seemingly happy outcome of the revolution in the Golden City is ambiguous. The simultaneously positive and negative phrase of "pity of madness" suggests how irrational and easily manipulated "the temper of the public mind" (Preface, CPWS 99) is, and how easily they can follow another authoritarian figure with blind idolatry ("kissed my feet"). Moreover, Shelley's depiction of Othman when he is faced with forgiveness and kindness is both subtle and realistic: He paints Othman in the way one might expect a powerful man to react to those more inferior people who have vanquished him. There is no reconciliation, but only harboured malice: "his straight lips were bent, / Men said, into a smile which guile portended" (5.36.2041-2042). Here Shelley has already foreshadowed the final failure of the revolution and the retaliation of tyranny, as he is aware that as a revolutionary hero Laon must act with power. Such is "the power to change events," as Roberts perceives, and "The most obvious power is always that employed by the structures one seeks to overthrow" (172).

By the end of Canto 5, Laon and Cythna enjoy, alongside the liberated people a “sacred festival, / A rite to attest the equality of all / Who live” (5.37.2047-2048).⁷⁶ It is also a feast that celebrates Shelley’s vegetarianism—“Never again may blood of bird or beast / Stain with its venomous stream a human feast” (5.51.2245-2246). However, the mirth following their revolutionary success is then interrupted by “rallying cries of treason and of danger” (6.3.2353) when the troops, sent by foreign despots to help Othman’s restoration, arrive at the Golden City. In the chaos, when Laon is about to be overrun by hostile soldiers, he sees

. . . with reinless speed
 A black Tartarian horse of giant frame
 Comes trampling over the dead; the living bleed
 Beneath the hoofs of that tremendous steed,
 On which, like to an Angel, robed in white,
 Sate one waving a sword . . . (6.19.2497-2503)

This unknown rider rescues Laon; four stanzas later, he and the reader realise simultaneously that this person is Cythna. Here Shelley casts Laon in the position of a traditional damsel in distress, salvaged by a valiant knight. He also masculinises Cythna through images of a steed and a sword, the latter being a frequent phallic image that, in the abduction scene in Canto 3, signifies Loan’s male aggression. Moreover, her horse tramples over numerous men, alive and dead. Her martial action in this episode borders on cruelty and, surprisingly, contradicts her plea for peace in the abduction scene.

In Canto 6, Laon and Cythna escapes from their pursuers and arrives at another retreat. The natural bower to which they come is a ruin. On its roof “Fair clinging weeds with ivy pale did grow, / Clasp[ing] its gray rents with a verdurous woof, / A hanging dome of leaves, a canopy moon-proof” (6.27.2575-2577). In this place, similar to the initial bower in which they

⁷⁶ Lori Molinari discusses extensively the revolutionary festival in her essay “Revising the Revolution: the Festival of Unity and Shelley’s Beau Ideal.” She pays specific attention to the three statues surrounding Cythna’s throne on the pyramid, the three mysterious images of a giant, a woman breastfeeding a basilisk, and a worm called “Faith,” from Stanza 49 to 50 in Canto 5. Molinari proposes that the festival that features the three statues is Shelley’s recapitulation of the French “Festival of the Unity and Indivisibility of the Republic” that took place on 10 August 1793.

spend their childhood, Laon and Cythna complete their sexual union. From Stanzas 30 to 37 Shelley endeavours to depict an ideal intercourse of perfect harmony and mutual affection that starts with the line, “To the pure all things are pure!” (6.30.2596). He presents eroticism as an experience in which language is deactivated, “When wildering passion swalloweth up the pauses / Of inexpressive speech” (6.31.2607-2608) in “the sickness of a deep / And speechless swoon of joy” (6.34.2637-2638). At the same time, he accentuates the theme of sibling incest, using conspicuous expressions: “The common blood which ran within our frames” (6.31.2610) and “I felt the blood that burned / Within her frame, mingle with mine” (6.34.2635).⁷⁷ The erotic ecstasy, as Shelley implies, is a state in which language no longer functions. It is an intoxicated state in which the signifier fails to signify the signified. The human faculty of signification in language also represents the ability to interpret and differentiate external objects as things that are other than self. Its deactivation in eroticism again points to the disintegration of subjectivity and the annihilation of social identities, now exemplified by Laon’s and Cythna’s sibling incestuous love. In Stanza 35, the sexual union is marked by

. . . one moment that confounded thus
 All thought, all sense, all feeling, into one
 Unutterable power, which shielded us
 Even from our own cold looks, when we had gone
 Into a wide and wild oblivion
 Of tumult and of tenderness? or now
 Had ages, such as make the moon and sun,
 The seasons, and mankind their changes know,
 Left fear and time unfelt by us alone below? (6.35.2641-2649)

Shelley confirms that sexual ecstasy is an oxymoronic experience of harmony and disruption, as it destroys all individual faculties—“All thought, all sense, all feeling”—and reunites them in a dark and chaotic being, an “Unutterable power.” But only in this chaotic “wild oblivion” can human beings transcend the vicissitude of time and space, and reach the state of eternity sought so futilely by worldly religions. Paradoxically those who enter into this

⁷⁷ These phrases that make the sibling incest obvious are changed in the republication, *The Revolt of Islam*.

sacred state of eroticism are also wracked by negative sensations of pain: “The failing heart in languishment,” the “quick dying gasps,” and the “faint eyes” in “tears of a wide mist boundless and dim” (6.36.2650-2654). This causes in them the experience that approximates to ultimate death, the “divine darkness” of “blind mortality” (6.37.2660-2661). The synthesis of sexual drive and death drive in the sibling incestuous union, as we can note, parallels Laon’s erotic fantasies during his Promethean/Christ-like torture in Canto 3, where his extreme suffering casts him into a trancelike experience of self-oblivion, in which pain is mixed with pleasure.⁷⁸

In the later part of Canto 6, as Cythna is troubled by hunger and rests in the retreat, Laon rides her Tartar steed to determine the outcome of the latest conflict in the Golden City and to seek food for Cythna. In the middle of his journey, he enters “a desolate village in a wood” whose dwellers have been stricken by war and famine. Laon searches for any survivors but only finds a woman, who is

. . . withered from a likeness of aught human
 Into a fiend, by some strange misery;
 Soon as she heard my steps she leaped on me,
 And glued her burning lips to mine, and laughed
 With a loud, long and frantic laugh of glee,
 And cried, ‘Now, Mortal, thou hast deeply quaffed
 The Plague’s blue kisses—soon millions shall pledge the draught!
 (6.48.2760-2766)

This grotesque woman calls herself “Pestilence,” an identity she adopts after her two children die during the war: “Since then I have no longer been a mother, / But I am Pestilence” (6.49.2771-2772). Pestilence asks Laon’s purpose, and after knowing he is in search of food, she leads him to her cottage, where she “piled three heaps of loaves, making a dearth / Among the dead—round which she set in state / A ring of cold, stiff babes”

⁷⁸ It is also noteworthy that Shelley’s placement of this episode of actual consummation right after the defeat of the revolution implies his ambiguous attitude to the sexual union between his hero and heroine. Sperry also observes that the sexual delight here, “centred on the complete identification of Laon and Cythna, proves inadequate to the strains it must undergo” (“The Sexual Theme” 49). In terms of narrative, their consummation is more like an escapist consolation for the political failure than it is an optimistic drive for them to continue the revolution. After all, in the subsequent cantos and until the final immolation, they barely achieve anything in reality.

(6.51.2791-2793). She offers the bread circled by the bodies of dead infants to Laon, whose eyes and heart ache upon seeing the dreadful spectacle. Laon accepts the food nonetheless and returns along to Cythna, after his unsuccessful attempt to persuade Pestilence to come with him so he can offer her his help. Critics have generally ignored this minor but bizarre episode, despite its highly sexual connotations. Richard Cronin briefly mentions that Pestilence is “Cythna’s antitype,” in whom “the ideal has projected its own antithesis” (*Shelley’s Poetic Thoughts* 106). Ulmer argues that when Pestilence forces her kiss on Laon’s lips, she represents a form of feminine sexual violence that stems from maternity, indicating that the entire epic can also be read as an Oedipal family romance, in which Laon and Othman are “competitors for Cythna, rivals for the prerogatives of fatherhood” (64). More recently, in his *Shelley and the Romantic Imagination*, Thomas R. Frosch presents another psychoanalytic interpretation, arguing that Pestilence is one of the “bad mothers” in the poem, who conveys an archaic anxiety generated by children’s sexual/genital maturity and maternal attachment (119).

At first sight, Shelley’s Pestilence is an apparent inversion of the mother figure, whose ability to give birth and nurture lives becomes a fatal power to “slay and smother.”⁷⁹ But this seemingly negative portrayal is in fact more ambiguous if we notice Shelley’s latent connection between eating and eroticism here. The hunger Laon and Cythna feel, as Frosch points out, is the outcome of their sexual union, a symbolic punishment for sexual maturity that alienates children from their mother, the primitive femininity they must detach from in order to establish social subjectivity (119). Though shocked and perhaps disgusted by Pestilence’s wretched appearance and maniacal demeanour, Laon nevertheless accepts the bread she offers, the loaves polluted by dead infants’ bodies. After his imaginative consumption of Cythna’s corpse in Canto 3, Shelley once again has Laon’s action border on

⁷⁹ As a twisted and decadent mother figure, Pestilence is reminiscent of Wordsworth’s Martha Ray in “The Thorn.” Though it is unclear that Martha’s child is a stillborn or killed by Martha herself, both women are driven into madness by the deaths of their children, which result from patriarchal malice (the heartless Stephen Hill and the war waged by Othman).

cannibalism. Bizarrely, though the bread contaminated by infants' corpses has potential meanings of cannibalism and necrophagy, it becomes "Our peaceful meal" and is consumed by Laon and Cythna without slightest hesitation. Furthermore, the bread revives Cythna, as we see "in her eyes, an atmosphere / Of health and hope; and sorrow languished near it" (6.55.2823-2828). That is, as an ostensible negative mother figure, Pestilence actually has positive effects on Shelley's hero and heroine. Being deprived of her children through paternal violence, Pestilence represents the primitive wholeness of the mother-body by practising a ritual that simulates the cannibalism of her own children. Cannibalism suggests "the idea of return," as Kilgour also proposes, "to communion with an original source . . . through the loss of human and individual identity" (11). In the madness that drives her to encircle the bread with the bodies of her dead children, Pestilence returns to the ultimate state of femininity that disintegrates the boundary between self and others, a boundary established to maintain and fortify subjectivity and individuality. Because Pestilence's cannibalistic offering revivifies the protagonists, Shelley potentially acknowledges in this episode the existence of a pre-Oedipal maternal wholeness and a tendency to return to this state of primitive femininity. Laon obtains the crucial bread at the price of being violated by Pestilence's "burning lips" and "Plague's blue kisses." His masculinity is then marred and weakened when he and Cythna consume the semi-human-flesh bread. Therefore, Pestilence in this episode is not merely an "antitype" or a "dark double" of Cythna. She also represents the return to primitive femininity, the state of the abject, to use Kristeva's words, where selfhood and identity are annihilated. As the embodiment of ultimate femininity, Pestilence's somatic contact with Laon (including her kiss and the bread) further degrades the hero's masculinity. From another perspective, contradictory to her name and her asserted power to "smother and slay," Pestilence in fact revives Cythna from her hunger-driven torpidity. In this mysterious and grotesque character, we can once again see how Shelley employs the obscene motif of cannibalism in the characterisation of his protagonists in this epic poem. He does so in a way that apparently

promotes positive interpersonal and social relationships that are based on love and sympathy.

Another function of Laon's encounter with Pestilence as a heterogeneous mother figure is to prepare him for hearing Cythna's "strange tale of strange endurance" (7.3.2848) revealed in Canto 7. In this ordeal, Cythna parallels Pestilence as a mother in distress, whose child is also taken away from her. What complicates Cythna's maternal experience is that her child is the fruit of her rape by Othman. A similar circumstance happens in Count Cenci's vicious fantasy about Beatrice giving birth to a child born of the incestuous rape. In the case of *The Cenci*, such a child will hurl the mother into a living inferno of emotional conflicts between love and hate, and will perpetuate the antagonism between the old and young generations. Shelley, in the earlier *Laon and Cythna*, presents Cythna as another rape victim, mothering a child of the forced union. However, Cythna's loving attitude towards her child is different from Beatrice's towards hers, at least in Count Cenci's imagination.

In Canto 7, Cythna relates to Laon the events following her abduction. Othman hears her singing with a lute. It is a "wild, and sad, and spirit-thrilling lay" (7.4.2863) that incites his lust for her. Although Cythna's "wondrous loveliness" of "great Nature's sacred power" (7.5.2866-2867) impedes him temporarily, Othman accomplishes his obnoxious deed as "A king, a heartless beast, a pageant and a name" (7.5.2874). This line suggests how a masculine identity, "a name," is established and fortified by oppressing the weak, the feminine. But Shelley soon shows a sense of the "power of the powerless" through Cythna's suffering and madness. Her "awful frenzy" in the aftermath of the rape was not only appalling to Othman, as "aghast and pale the Tyrant fled away" (7.6.2883), but also

. . . was a beam of light, a power
Which dawned through the rent soul; and words it gave,
Gestures and looks, such as in whirlwinds bore
(Which might not be withstood, whence none could save)
All who approached their sphere, like some calm wave
Vexed into whirlpools by the chasms beneath (7.7.2884-2889).

In this passage Cythna's passive suffering nurtures an active power that

soon radiates from her broken self, her “rent soul.” Moreover, Shelley elevates Cythna’s suffering to the level of the natural sublime; the victimised Cythna becomes “whirlwinds,” “whirlpools,” and a fathomless abyss that subdue and absorb all spectators. Through such a representation, Shelley demonstrates that the extreme pain and disorder of feminine passivity can generate a strong power of activity with its extreme pain and disorder. That is, Cythna’s “awful frenzy” first intimidates Othman and then her radiant “madness” evokes other slaves’ sympathy and anger, who become “Fearless and free” and “began to breathe / Deep curses” (7.7.2891-2892), sowing the seed of the forthcoming revolution.

To prevent Cythna from spreading her influence in the palace, Othman sends two servants to imprison her in a cave surrounded by water. The two servants are “a green and wrinkled eunuch” and a “wretch from infancy / Made dumb by poison” (7.8.2895, 2898-2899). The peculiarity of these two slaves has drawn critical attention, especially because of the episode’s negative presentation of the Orient. Emily A. Haddad points out that the “castration makes an immediate reference to (unnatural) oriental practice” and the second slave’s origin in “fire island” “also confirms the oriental quality” (21). She concludes that Shelley’s design of the two slaves not only conflates tyranny with slavery, but also aligns the characters with the Eastern world. Michael J. Neth highlights the different connotations of the eunuch’s greenness: It paradoxically represents fertility in plants and illness/jealousy in human beings. He also connects the speechless slave to the act of muting slaves with poison, a cruel punishment exercised by slave owners in Jamaican and American plantations.⁸⁰ In the context of Shelley’s epic, the green eunuch and the voiceless diver serve as Othman’s warning about Cythna’s resistance, whose punishments are the deprivation of fertility and the loss of voice. Additionally, the eunuch is a reflection of Othman’s own anxiety as an aging man who gradually loses his sexual potency. In a larger symbolic sense, he is a reflection of the old generation’s deteriorating

⁸⁰ See Neth’s commentaries in *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Johns Hopkins, 2012), p. 801.

sexuality and physical strength, which breeds in the old a jealousy and hatred for the young.

During the imprisonment “in a cave / Above the water, by that chasm of sea” (7.7.2929-2930), a sea-eagle regularly brings Cythna food. The assaulted and imprisoned woman then sinks into another state of disorder, with “The fiend of madness” disturbing her at intervals. A symptom of this nameless madness is the incapacity to correctly perceive and categorise external objects, as in Cythna’s eyes “the sea-eagle looked a fiend, who bore / Thy mangled limbs for food” (7.15.2961-2962). Again Shelley employs the motif of cannibalism as Cythna imagines that the food brought by the sea-eagle is Laon’s flesh. While she is in this chaotic state, Cythna discovers that she is pregnant as a result of her rape by Othman:

Another frenzy came—there seemed a being
Within me—a strange load my heart did bear,
As if some living thing had made its lair
Even in the fountains of my life; (7.16.2967-2970)

Shelley’s description of Cythna’s pregnancy and childbirth is simultaneously explicit and ambiguous. In Stanza 17, Cythna feels that “new pulses seemed / To beat beside my heart” and “There was a babe within,” and she tells Laon that “after a lapse of lingering pain, / I saw that lovely shape, which near heart had lain” (7.17.2977-2982). All these detailed depictions of pregnancy are interspersed with ambivalent phrases such as “Methought,” “I dreamed,” “I deemed,” and “I doubt,” as E. B. Murray also notices (576). That is, readers cannot be certain if what Cythna relays is true or is a consequence of her hallucinations. Nevertheless, Cythna’s pregnancy, be it imaginative or real, must be the result of her rape by Othman, because in terms of the poem’s timeline, this incident happens before her sexual union with Laon in Canto 6. To the child born of her painful and shameful violation, Cythna shows an entirely different attitude from Beatrice’s in Count Cenci’s fancy. Instead of a being mixed with her own appearance and her violator’s loathsome outward features, as is the case in *The Cenci*, Cythna sees

. . . a babe, beautiful from its birth,—
It was like thee, dear love, its eyes were thine,
Its brow, its lips, and so upon the earth

It laid its fingers as now rest on mine
Thine own, beloved! (7.18.2983-2987)

From Cythna's viewpoint, the child does not seem to bear any resemblance to her biological father, Othman. Instead, Cythna sees another Laon in her baby. Unlike Beatrice, whose child becomes an object of hate and pain, the child born of Cythna's rape becomes her sole consolation in her confinement. That is, the child is a singular comfort—until one night when she suddenly vanishes, "like those illusions clear and bright, / Which dwell in lakes" (7.22.3023-3024). Cythna speculates that the dumb diver takes away the child in the night, which makes her feel "the very life was gone / Out of my heart" (7.23.3033-3034). Her physical changes (her swollen breasts) and mental distress attest to the existence of the child and her profound love for it.

From her narrative, which oscillates between reality and fantasy, we can observe that Cythna has to renounce her human faculties of perception and reasoning; the former enables her to discern Othman's likeness in the child, and the latter compels her to confirm that the child is Othman's based on the epic's timeline. While relaying the tale to Laon, Cythna evokes her vision in madness and deactivates the two faculties. Only by doing so, she is able to erase Othman's loathsome features (which may actually be there) from the child and further imagine Laon's images (which are actually unlikely to be there) in the child, as if she is the result of the happy consummation in their idyllic retreat in Canto 3 (which happens, chronically, after the childbirth in the sea cave). To purify the vicious outcome of rape and regard it as a happy fruit of the mutual affection between her and Laon, Cythna has to suspend her reason and defy the order of time and space. In other words, when Shelley defines Cythna's pregnancy, childbirth, and love for the child in Canto 7 as her "brainless fantasy," he insinuates the idea that only through madness caused by extreme suffering can she emancipate herself from her oppressed state as a rape victim and dissolve her supposed repugnance at the child, born of such a disgraceful union with her violator. In this context, Cythna's madness, the suspension of *principium individuationis*, also epitomises the power of imagination, from which springs forth artistic/poetical

creation that can transcend the plight that plagues her in reality. Without poetic imagination, as Cythna later laments, “Sense and Reason” will “bid the heart / That gazed beyond the wormy grave despair: / These eyes, these lips, this blood, seems darky there / To fade in hideous ruin” with “no calm sleep” but only “senseless death—a ruin dark and deep!” (9.32.3749-3756).

The revolution that Shelley aspires to does not come to pass in *Laon and Cythna*. In Canto 12, Laon is seized and bound on a pyre by Othman’s soldiers. Cythna, predating Brünnhilde riding her warhorse into her husband Siegfried’s pyre in the final scene of Richard Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung*, rises from her Tartan steed and joins Laon in the flames. The couple is miraculously transported from the pyre to a final natural retreat. They are also united with Cythna’s child, now a “bright Shape” and a “plumed Seraph,” who then recounts the aftermath of the immolation. This final bower of union, “exempted now from mortal fear or pain,” is identified as “The Temple of the Spirit” in the final stanza of the poem, thus concluding the epic in a spiritual harmony. Shelley ends *Laon and Cythna* by returning to a metaphysical realm of Platonism with the mundane world remaining in the same state of perdition. It is perhaps not surprising that John Taylor Coleridge’s *Quarterly* review dismisses the poem as an utter misapplication of ideas and a misconception of reality. The final happiness in a purely metaphysical realm seems to provide certain proof for later negative comments about Shelley’s poetry, such as Matthew Arnold’s famous “beautiful and ineffectual” remark and F. R. Leavis’s disapproval of Shelley’s “weak grasp upon the actual” (qtd. in Reiman and Fraistat 541, 546). Even Harold Bloom, one of the mid-twentieth century’s strongest champions of Shelley’s works, calls it “an abortive allegorical epic which I do not admire” (8). Kenneth Neil Cameron also criticises its length, its obscuring of realism and fancy, and its absence of “unity of structure and mood” (*The Golden Years* 311).

My analysis of *Laon and Cythna* does not aim to defend Shelley’s ineffectuality in presenting the *beau idéal* of revolution, as he promises it will. On the level of aesthetics, I do not believe that Shelley conveys his ideas about political and social reforms in a compelling way. His preaching of

ideologies against religion and social conventions such as freedom, equality, and universal love are highly repetitive and didactic, as shown from Cantos 8 through 11. However, the discussion in this section illuminates how Shelley's poetics of suffering and madness forms the essential process of Laon's and Cythna's mental transformation. Through the "obscene" experiences of bodily torture, imaginative cannibalism, incest, and rape, Laon and Cythna undergo chaotic states of "brainless fantasy" and a "sense of senselessness." In these states, where eroticism and poetic imagination are synthesised so as to be mutually reinforcing, Laon and Cythna violently annihilate their previous identities to approximate Shelley's ideal of mutual affection based on incestuous love. This love can be, in Roberts's words, "transformed into the all-embracing unity of divine *erōs*" (189) and extended to all of humankind. Shelley may have fail to achieve his ultimate aim with this epic. Nevertheless, his poetics of suffering and madness attests to the aesthetic phenomenon of self-annihilation that destabilises and disintegrates rather than fortifies Romantic subjectivity—the very "obscene" side of sexual desire in English Romantic works.

CHAPTER 3
John Keats:
Poetic Imagination, Erotic Love, and Religious Ecstasy

INTRODUCTION: FROM "EFFEMINACY" TO THE "UNPOETICAL" POET

As my readings of Blake and Shelley demonstrate, one of the most significant components of the "obscene" aesthetics of self-annihilation in Romantic poetry is transsexuality, or more specifically, the degradation of masculine subjectivity. In Blake's *Milton*, Satan, the prototype of the Romantic rebellious hero originating from *Paradise Lost*, is feminised as a mild and weeping creature; in Plate 22 of *Milton*, Blake positions himself in a feminine/sodomised position of fellatio. In his illustrations of Job, Blake also recasts the model of Christian virtues of faith and perseverance as a rape victim indulging in an ecstatic state. In Shelley's epic poem, the hero Laon undergoes a series of torments that undermine his masculinity in similar erotic experiences of extreme pain and pleasure. Accordingly, in Romantic poetry, traditionally regarded as a masculine phenomenon, which is partly exemplified by the canonisation of the Big-Six, as Anne K. Mellor points out in her *Romanticism and Feminism* (8), the hero's transsexuality through feminisation or degradation of masculinity is not only a necessary factor for the poets' aspiration for political or religious ideals. It insinuates darker and alternative aspects of poetry that comprise disruption of selfhood, unconsciousness, anti-knowledge, and anti-subjectivity—"the confrontation of the feminine" that "does not succeed in differentiating itself as other but threatens one's own and clean self" (65) as Julia Kristeva would put it. What I have explored in Blake's and Shelley's works is the very "femininity" that ought to be excluded, to be "abjected," in order to sustain the masculine selfhood and subjectivity. In Keats, the issue of femininity originates from his construal of poetic imagination as an erotic process of self-annihilation. This formulation can be established through an examination of his letters, and further explored in his later narrative poems—"Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil" and "The Eve of St. Agnes"—as this chapter aims to accomplish.

Generally, the representations of transsexuality in Blake and Shelley

are interwoven in the fabric of their allegorical and symbolic poetics and had been discovered and analysed in modern studies. The case of Keats is different. Keatsian femininity in his poetry was not only noticed, but ridiculed and lampooned by his contemporaries, including critics and fellow poets; it was also a derogative personal characterisation of the poet himself. In his 1818 article “On the Cockney School of Poetry” published in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, John Gibson Lockhart dismisses Keats’s works as “loose, nerveless versification” and the poet as “a still smaller poet” and “a boy of pretty abilities” (530) after denouncing Keats’s “profane and vulgarised” adaptation of Greek mythology. The word “pretty” that Lockhart uses here evokes another incident during Keats’s meeting with Wordsworth at Thomas Monkhouse’s place in London in 1817. As Benjamin Robert Haydon records, after Keats recited a hymn to Pan in *Endymion* for Wordsworth, of whom Keats is “a young Worshipper,” Wordsworth coldly remarked “a Very pretty piece of Paganism” (Butler 136), which profoundly hurt Keats’s feeling.⁸¹ Both Lockhart and Wordsworth used “pretty” to describe the subject matter of Greek mythology in Keats’s poetry. The word “pretty” stands for attraction and pleasantness in appearance especially of women and children, but in a “delicate or diminutive way” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (“pretty, adj2a”). Its feminine connotation is ostensible. Greco-Roman mythology not only represents the polytheist paganism against the monotheist Christianity, it also stands for a cosmological order centred on a female Mother Earth, contradicting to the one based on an utterly male father-son identification of Jehovah and Jesus in Christianity. Keats’s espousal of the former and rejection of the latter can be traced as early as his 1816 sonnet “Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition,” in which he recalls the classical “fireside joys” and “Lydian airs” in a despondent age of the Christian “sermon’s horrid sound” (*PJK* 88).⁸² In

⁸¹ In his more recent study *John Keats: A New Life*, Nicholas Roe holds a reserved attitude to the incident. Keats was probably not affected much by Wordsworth’s comment, because they met at least five times in the following week. Roe even speculates that Keats might actually take the “pretty Paganism” comment as a compliment (196).

⁸² Except indicated otherwise, all quotations from Keats’s poetical works are from *The Poems of John Keats* edited by Jack Stillinger (Heinemann, 1978). All quotations from

the dedication to Leigh Hunt of his 1817 collection, Keats again shows nostalgic sentiments for the classic “Glory and loveliness” of “crowd of nymphs” and “The shrine of Flora” (20). In the early nineteenth century, classic paganism exalts female power of reproduction and approves “unlicensed sexuality in women,” as Marilyn Butler points out (136), while institutionalised Christianity entails the exclusion of female sexuality and often champions the virtue of chastity. The negative notion of Keats’s femininity in his person and poetry is thus inferred on various levels in both Lockhart’s “a boy of pretty abilities” derision and Wordsworth’s “pretty Paganism” dismissal.

Another contemporary criticism of Keats’s problematic sexuality comes from Lord Byron. In terms of Keats’s 1820 volume that includes “Isabella,” “Lamia,” “The Eve of St. Agnes,” and the great Odes, Byron deems Keats’s works “the Onanism of poetry” and calls the poet “this miserable Self-polluter of the human Mind” (Byron and Moore 217). In another journal, Byron again lambastes Keats’s poetry as “a sort of mental masturbation” (225). Rachel Schulkins notes the connotation of effeminacy in Byron’s comments, pointing out that “Keats’s poetry trespasses the conventional cultural construction of masculinity by embracing feminine qualities such as passivity, sentimentality and luxury” (1). In his article in *The Indicator*, Leigh Hunt perceives that Keats’s Apollo in *Hyperion* is “too effeminate and human” and “weeps and wonders somewhat too much” (352). In his essay “On Effeminacy of Character” William Hazlitt analyses the idea of effeminacy, which “arises from a prevalence of the sensibility over the will” and “want of fortitude,” and those who indulge in such a complex “live in a luxurious endless dream” (“On Effeminacy” 105). At the end of this essay Hazlitt contrasts Byron’s poetry with Keats’s, arguing that the latter “was a deficiency in masculine energy of style” despite all its “beauty, tenderness, delicacy” (113). In his “To a Poetical Friend,” George Felton Mathew, though in a praising tone, also observes that Keats “delightest in fanciful song” and “strange tales” and infuses “wonderful

Keats’s letters are from *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821* in two volumes, edited by Hyder Edward Rollins (Harvard UP, 1958).

loves” and “blisses abounding” into his poetry (*KPP* 10). The comments above indicate that for his contemporaries, Keats’s femininity lies in his self-indulgence in youth, excessive sensual pleasures, irrational fancy, and alienation from reality.

The feminisation of Keats himself can be observed in the remarks of those critics who come to Keats’s defence. Martin Aske’s article “Keats, the Critics, and the Politics of Envy” provides certain insight into Keats’s self-acknowledged femininity. Aske refers to John Hamilton Reynolds’s defence of Keats as a victim of brutal critics from *Blackwood* and the *Quarterly*. Reynolds juxtaposes Keats with female writers such as Lady Morgan, who also suffers from the *Quarterly*’s harsh review. Richard Waterhouse supports Keats in a more sensual (or even erotic) manner, saying that the *Quarterly* reviewer of *Endymion* “laid his finger of contempt on such beauty” (qtd. in Aske 51). Keats’s own defence echoes Waterhouse’s words: “I admire Human Nature but I do not like *Men*—I should like to compose things honourable to Man—but not fingerable over by *Men*” (*LK* 1.415). Therefore, there is a different version of feminised figure from the self-indulgent youth observed by Byron and Hazlitt; Keats in his defenders’ and his own eyes resembles a damsel in distress, innocent and powerless, who is threatened by the malicious and erotic caresses of the “fingers,” a masculine and phallic image represented by hostile critics. In this passivity Keats perhaps has Thomas Chatterton in mind, whose suicide at the age of seventeenth had become an iconic image in English Romanticism. In his sonnet dedicated to Chatterton, Keats laments: “Thou didst die / A half-blown flower, which cold blasts amate” (*PJK* 32). Such a metaphorical depiction of a pretty, sensitive, and fragile youth ruined by a malignantly critical and cruel society parallels his self-portrayal of being “fingerable over by Men.” After Keats’s death, in the Preface of his elegiac *Adonais*, Shelley replicates Keats’s lamentation on Chatterton: “where canker-worms abound, what wonder, if its young flower was blighted in the bud” (*MW* 529). The effeminate metaphor of an infant flower nipped before its maturity by the cruel external world (which perhaps also echoes Blake’s “The Sick Rose”) has been attached to Keats, who must

“Die of a rose in aromatic death,” as Hazlitt quotes Pope’s line from *An Essay on Man* in his “On Effeminacy of Character” (113).

However, it can be observed that Keats’s self-identification of gender qualities oscillates between masculinity and femininity, and such unstable mental status is significantly connected to his self-awareness as a poet and his relationship with poetry and with the exterior world. In his journal letter to George and Georgiana on 13 March 1819, Keats mentions “I know not why Poetry and I have been so distant lately I must make some advances soon or she will cut me entirely” (*LK* 2.74). Here the personified poetry is feminine, while Keats as a poet regards himself as a male suitor who “advances”—a masculine and aggressive gesture—upon a coy lady. Therefore, it can be discerned that Keats sometimes seeks to establish and affirm his masculine identity as a male poet, striving to identify, as Margaret Homans notes, “not only with male sexual potency but also with the masculine appropriation of the feminine” (564). In another letter to George and Georgiana on 19, Keats describes his indulgence in oversleeping indolence—“My passions are all asleep from my having slumbered till nearly eleven and weakened the animal fibre all over me to a delightful sensation about three degrees on this side of faintness”—that is a “state of effeminacy,” in which “the fibres of the brain are relaxed in common with the rest of the body” (*LK* 2.78). In this depiction of self-recognised effeminacy, Keats conveys the idea that his state in artistic creation is of physical inactiveness and languor with chaotic sensations running amok in his brain. It is also a state of ecstasy: “This is the only happiness; and is a rare instance of advantage in the body overpowering the Mind” (*LK* 2.79), echoing his notion of “Negative Capability” in the earlier letter in 1818. Keats then describes three personified figures of Poetry, Ambition, and Love in his trance, “three figures on a greek vase—a Man and two women” (*LK* 2.79). Here strangely the gender roles of poet and poetry are reversed again, with Keats being an effeminate figure while Poetry being a Man.

Discussing the ambivalence of masculinity and femininity in Keats’s writing, Susan J. Wolfson correctly observes that Keats strives to “create a

poetic identity and win acceptance as a poet” by internalising “social and psychological attitudes about gender” (“Feminizing Keats” 325). That is, Keats was fully aware of the ideal masculinity in his time, and aspired to accommodate it in his poetical works to obtain positive recognition. It is the reason he imagines himself as a male suitor (the poet) to woo a lady (poetry) before he truly starts writing. Wolfson takes her argument further by stating that after Keats embarks on writing poetry, he “imagines the masculine self being feminized or rendered effeminate by women exercising power and authority” and “projects feminine figures as forces against manly self-possession and its social validator, professional maturity” (“Feminizing Keats” 325). Thus, the very process of poetic creation consists of a liminal point. On one side, there is the real world of Keats’s self-affirmation of masculinity, and on the other side, the realm of poetic imagination, in which such affirmation is threatened and dissolved. Accordingly, for Keats, writing poetry is itself an experience of transsexuality, “this state of effeminacy,” in which he forsakes his masculine identity. In his letter to John Taylor on 27 February 1818, Keats famously asserts an axiom of poetry resembling Wordsworth’s “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” that “if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all” (*LK* 1.238-239). Such spontaneity insinuates his idea of poetic creation as a process of anti-will and unconsciousness. In writing poetry, it is his will to maintain a masculine subjectivity and obtain social acknowledgement from the predominately masculine literary circle, and his consciousness as a male poet that are endangered and annihilated.

The loss of subjectivity and pre-existing identity becomes essential in Keats’s formulation of writing poetry. In his most renowned letter to George and Tom in December 1817, Keats proposes that a great man of literature such as Shakespeare must possess “*Negative Capability*,” the quality of being “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (*LK* 1.193). “Uncertainties” and “doubts” signify an alternative epistemological order (or non-order) of anti-knowledge and anti-truth, as Tim Milnes perceives that Keats’s “rejection of the

verificationist values of the Enlightenment raises the possibility that the aesthetic is the uncanny and vengeful doubt of truth as well as its consummation” and “the unassimilable untruth of a determining otherness” (71). The capitalised word “Mysteries” has clear religious meaning. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* shows, “mystery” is a “religious truth known or understood only by divine revelation” or “a doctrine of faith involving difficulties which human reason is incapable of solving” (“mystery, n2a”) but it can also stand for rituals in the Christian Church, especially the Eucharist (“mystery, n3”). It reminds us of Keats’s affinity to the classic Greco-Roman mythology, the “pretty Paganism” as retorted by Wordsworth, and his relatively more negative evaluation of institutionalised Christianity. As the Shelleyan imagination in *A Defence of Poetry*, Keatsian Mystery here is reminiscent to the Nietzschean idea of *Dionysian intoxication*, where “fact & reason” are out of reach, *principium individuationis* is disabled, and the subject’s epistemological power of categorisation and interpretation is lost.

Keatsian Mystery can be further traced in his verse letter to John Hamilton Reynolds on 25 March 1818. This “Epistle,” originally aiming to entertain the ill Reynolds, reveals Keats’s concerns for artistic creation and the heterogeneous mental state it entails. Keats opens the poem with his half-slumberous experience, which resembles Laon’s disturbed yet erotic vision depicted by Shelley, a “disjoined” mental condition that synthesises pain and pleasure. Moreover, what emerge in the poet’s trance are illogical and unreasonable images: the grotesque fusion of “witch’s eyes” and “cherub’s mouth,” the indecorous “Voltaire with casque and shield and Habergeon, / And Alexander with his night-cap on,” and the anachronistic Socrates with “his cravat” (*LK* 1.259). All these images convey the idea of breaching conventional relationships of association and identification. The second stanza presents a pagan sacrificial ritual of “Some Titian colours” that predates Stanza 4 of the later “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”⁸³ From classicism to medievalism, Keats in the next stanza refers to another painting of Claude

⁸³ As Stuart Sperry and several other critics have noted, there is no such a painting by Titian that portrays this scene of sacrifice, and Keats probably was thinking of Claude Lorrain’s *Sacrifice to Apollo* (“The Epistle” 585).

Lorrain, *The Enchanted Castle*, which is “[u]pon a Rock, on the Border of a Lake, / Nested in Trees” (LK 1.260). The “old Magic like Urganda’s sword” and the “Merlin’s Hall” evoke medieval romance and fantasy, engendering an unrealistic atmosphere so detached from the present and physical world where Keats and Reynolds dwell.

Both the classic and medieval scenes develop into the central idea of “material sublime” in the eighth stanza: “O that our dreamings all of sleep or wake / Would all their colours from the sunset take: / From something of material sublime” (LK 1.261). The phrase “material sublime” has been noted and discussed by critics. By reading it as “sublime (adjective) material (noun),” Jack Stillinger gives the phrase a rather simple meaning: something “elevated, uplifted from the world” and “unearthly, like the fantastic dreams” (“Keat and Romance” 596). Sperry interprets the phrase as “the desire of the imagination to possess at once the best of both worlds, the ethereal and the concrete” (“The Epistle” 589). Louise Z. Smith proposes that “material sublime” is both “noun-adjective and as adjective-noun,” arising from the external world rather than subjective feeling. She further argues that for Keats dreaming “is not an escape from the jostling world, but an intense perception of beauty and truth in that world” (303). While both Sperry and Smith believe that through this phrase Keats is promoting an aesthetic ideal that counters the Platonic dichotomy of metaphysical ideas and physical matters, Besty Winakur Tontiplaphol more recently stresses Keats’s wish for “sensory surfeit, not the grand immateriality” (“Pleasure in the Age of Talkers” 46).

Aside from the above interpretations, the meaning of “material” can be situated in early modern medical contexts, defined by Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language* as “corporeal” and by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “of a disease” (“material, adj1b”). The correlation between Keats’s life as a general practitioner of medicine and his poetic creation has been addressed extensively in Keats studies, from as early as William Hale-White’s 1938 *Keats as Doctor and Patient*, Daniel Goellnicht’s 1984 *The Poet-Physician: Keats and Medical Science*, and Hermione de Almeida’s

1991 *Romantic Medicine and John Keats* to the 2017 essay collection *John Keats and the Medical Imagination* edited by Nicholas Roe. In these studies, though Keats's medical background and his life oft-impacted by disease and death are traced to offer new insights into his poetic works, none of them consider the possible medical meaning of the term "material sublime." Although de Almeida does discuss the "Epistle," arguing that the verse-letter represents "the poet's attempt to use his imagination to soothe and comfort a sick friend and to counteract actual disease with images of health" (43), she pays no attention to "material sublime" at all.

W. P. Albrecht notes that Keats's usage of the word "sublime" reflects "a state of mind remote from ordinary perception dulled, as it is, by self-centeredness, materialism, and the confusion of daily cares," adding that "Keats does not separate the sublime from the beautiful except as 'sublime' may mean the intensity of emotion necessary to beauty" (196). However, in Keats's letters, the sublime also emerges alongside his heightened worries for Tom's illness, such as the "sublime Misery" in the one to Benjamin Bailey in October 1817 (*LK* 1.173). During his stay in Dumfries, visiting Robert Burns's Cottage and Tomb, Keats encountered a vulgar man, "a curious old Bitch," "a flat old Dog," whose indecorous manner, in Keats's view, disgraced the solemn air of Burns's heritage and "hindered my sublimity" (*LK* 1.324-325). Such "sublimity" that Keats strongly perceived in the Cottage was engendered by the Scottish bard's suffering, as he laments that "His Misery is a dead weight upon the nimbleness of one's quill," and, alluding to King Lear in prison, "he was miserable—We can see horribly clear in the works of such a man his whole life, as if we were God's spies" (*LK* 1.325). That is, despite Keats's assertion that the sublime is an essential component of the "eternal Being" of beauty, it intrinsically co-exists with human suffering, both physical and mental, signifying "the power of otherness to bring desolation" (Ende 90). Combining the word "material," which indicates unhealthy corporeality in the medical context of Keats's time, the Keatsian "material sublime" thus denotes a form of aesthetics that is empowered by the human body, particularly the abnormal and pathological body afflicted by disease or

violence, such as Reynolds's current sick body and those victimised by "an eternal fierce destruction," reified by Keats's description of "The shark at savage prey—the hawk at pounce, / The gentle Robin, like a pard or ounce, / Ravening a worm" (*LK* 1.262).

This interpretation of the "material sublime" brings forth the crucial role of human suffering in Keats's idea of poetic creation. Following the "material sublime," Keats recognises that "For in the world / We jostle," a pessimistic line that echoes his reflection on *King Lear* about "the fierce dispute / Betwixt damnation and impassion'd clay" (*PJK* 225). In the "Epistle," Keats underscores the inability of knowledge and reason to redeem human beings from the destined suffering; he dares not "philosophize" and he will never be awarded "the prize" of "High reason, and the lore of good and ill" (*LK* 1.262). In the line "Things cannot to the will / Be settled, but they tease us out of thought," the idea of Negative Capability re-emerges and Keats recapitulates the decentralisation of knowledge and the subversion of epistemological order. The "Things" not only include objects and scenarios in the exterior world—natural grandeurs in the Burkean sublime—but also human feelings responsive to the exterior world and to human interactions, benign or malignant. Even the achievements of scientific knowledge and philosophical reasoning cannot settle Keatsian Mystery of negativity, "Where but to think is to be full of sorrow," as he laments in "Ode to a Nightingale" (3.27 *PJK* 370). The "material sublime" complicates the nature of this verse letter, originally meant to entertain the sick Reynolds, with the transition from the fantastic and pleasant depictions of Lorrain's neoclassic art to a pessimistic evaluation of human subjectivity and selfhood that are based on knowledge and its will to truth. This pessimism over the deposition of epistemological order corresponds to the grotesque, indecorous, and anachronistic chains of association (or anti-association) in the first stanza.

What is more striking is that Keats does not deem poetry an ideal substitute for knowledge and reason to emancipate human beings from suffering. Conversely, poetic imagination is "yet still confin'd,— / Lost in a sort of Purgatory blind" (*LK* 1.262). For Keats, poetry is not an instrument that can

restore human subjectivity and re-establish a new epistemological order. A poet and his poetry deepen and aestheticise the loss of human subjectivity and offer an alternative perspective to survey suffering in the human world, instead of absolving them. Milnes insightfully observes that for Keats, when “reason lurches into scepticism, and thence into alienation and indifference, the consolation of the aesthetic is increasingly imbued with power of alterity (68). But at the end of the “Epistle” and, as discussed in the following section, in “Isabella,” there seems to be no consolation at all, as Keats has moved away from his earlier optimism about poetry and love in, for example, *Endymion*, which possess the power to break the “prison, / Of flesh and bone” that “curbs, and confines, and frets / Our spirit’s wings,” and withstand the “despondency” that “besets / Our pillows,” and redeem “our dull, uninspired, snail-paced lives” (4.20-23, 25).⁸⁴ Rather than providing comfort and hope as positive drives for human beings to sustain subjectivity in their agonising existence, Keats’s later poetry generates a sort of negative and “obscene” pleasure by erotising human suffering. For Keats, poetic creation is not only a state of anti-knowledge and anti-truth, “uncertainties, Mysteries, and doubts.” It is also a process that is anti-living, unhealthy, pathological, self-corroding and self-destructive. The issue of feminisation, therefore, is actually a necessary phenomenon in Keats, since it is necessitated by the self-annihilation of John Keats as a male poet. That is, Keats is neither a man, nor a poet, as he postulates in a letter to Richard Woodhouse in October 1818: “As to the poetical Character itself . . . it is not itself—it has no self” and “A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity” (*LK* 1.386-387). Furthermore, Keats detaches his poetry from himself as a poet: “not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature—how can it, when I have no nature?” (1.387). Here we have a Keatsian paradox. Keats is the most poetical because he fulfils, to the greatest extent, the condition of self-

⁸⁴ Later in *The Fall of Hyperion*, Keats re-aspires to the redemptive quality of poetry, or what Hugh Roberts terms “therapeutic drive” in English Romanticism, by declaring that “sure a poet is a sage; / A humanist, physician to all men’ who ‘pours out a balm upon the world” (1.189-190, 201).

annihilation; in other words, Keats is the most *poetical* because he is the most *unpoetical*.

While he acknowledges the heterogeneous state of writing poetry as anti-epistemological and self-annihilating, Keats as a poet still aspires to have a positive contribution to the world, “ambitious of doing the world some good” (LK 1.387). Such is the basis of his oscillation between social masculinity and anti-social femininity. It is similar to the self-conflicting Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry* and *The Cenci*, who likewise proposes the positive social function of poetry, but at the same time, discerns the darker drives in poetry that necessarily jeopardise the former function. Keats is more conscious of this destined contradiction between a poet’s will to social contribution and his poetic creation that tends to overthrow such a will, as he recognises himself as “the camelion Poet,” who delights in “conceiving an Iago as an Imogen,” a sort of amoral, “beyond good and evil” aesthetics that “shocks the virtuous philosopher” (LK 1.387). At the end of this crucial letter to Woodhouse, after confessing that what he has been saying about “the poetical Character” is perhaps not “from myself; but from some character in whose soul I now live” (LK 1.388), Keats assures his friend that his affections and regards for him are “from myself.” In other words, Keats is unable to recognise his friendship with Woodhouse when he is in the mode of writing poetry. Once again Keats indicates that “the poetical Character” and the state of poetic creation are anti-social phenomena of self-annihilation and oblivion of all positive social connections.

In the following sections, I will examine Keats’s narrative poems in his 1820 collection—*Isabella; or the Pot of Basil*, *Lamia*, and *The Eve of St. Agnes*—in order to argue that these poetic works attest to my formulation of Keats’s negative and heterogeneous idea about poetry itself, which exemplifies the “obscene” aesthetic phenomenon of self-annihilation in English Romanticism. In his retellings of Boccaccio’s tale, Keats not only presents the patriarchal and commercial oppression upon romantic love and sexual desire, as many critics have discussed, but also presents such affection and desire, based on poetic imagination, are in essence

pathological, and self-destructive. Furthermore, Isabella's creation of the "Pot of Basil" that contains Lorenzo's severed head is the actualisation of Keats's poetic creation that borders on anti-social and self-annihilating oblivion, corresponding to the poet's oblivion of his social connection with Reynolds at the end of this letter of "material sublime." In "The Eve of St. Agnes," by eroticising the Christian images and motifs, Keats incorporates sexual desire with the experience of religious sacredness. In the later part of the poem, by deploying pagan and folklore images of Merlin, the mermaid, "La belle dame sans mercy," and Medusa, Keats further demonstrates that the erotic experience accessed through ritualistic practice dissolves the boundary between male activity and female passivity. In these two poems, Keats reveals the intense interrelationship between erotic love, poetic imagination, and religious sacredness as a negative and "obscene" aesthetic phenomenon. As traditionally poetic creation is considered a masculine phenomenon in the Romantic period, Keats's works manifests an alternative feminine aspect of poetry. The eroticism in these works demonstrates that although sexual desire often symbolises the Romantic rebellion against political/religious oppression and rationalist repression, as a route to establish individuality and subjectivity, the erotic subject in Keats is endangered, de-normalised, and dissolved in the experiences of artistic creation and religious sacredness.

"ISABELLA" AND THE PATHOLOGICAL POETICS OF EROTIC LOVE

In "Sleep and Poetry," the concluding poem of his 1817 collection, Keats announces his farewell to the sensual delights of "the breath / Of flowering bays, that I may die a death / Of luxury" and "The o'verwhelming sweets, 'twill bring to me the fair / Visions of all places" (57-59 *PJK* 70). In his subsequent career, he is determined to "pass them for a nobler life, / Where I may find the agonies, the strife / Of human hearts" (123-124 *PJK* 72). After *Endymion*, Keats's 1820 volume *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems* fulfils the promise made in "Sleep and Poetry" by exploring the darker aspects of erotic love. As Jeffrey N. Cox comments, in the three

narrative poems highlighted in the volume's title, despite their forms as romances, Keats "created a kind of anti-romance capable of confronting the sorrows of life beyond the wish-fulfilling enchantments offered by conventional romances" (*KPP* 410). What Keats represents is not the pleasure derived from fulfilment of desire, but the pain begot by the obstruction and deprivation of such fulfilment, and the twisted, abnormal, and pathological alternative of it, from which emerges the negative pleasure of self-annihilation that is inherent in Keats's idea of poetic creation itself.

As one of the "anti-romances," "Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil" is Keats's versified retelling of the fifth story of the fourth night from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, possibly inspired by William Hazlitt's lecture "On Dryden and Pope" on 3 February 1818, in which he encourages translations of Boccaccio's and Chaucer's works (*KPP* 429). Following Boccaccio's story, Keats continues the theme of innocent love between two youths being ruined by capitalist calculation, which, along with an undertone of class struggle, forms the basis of mainstream critical discussion of the poem. Louise Z. Smith observes in the poem that "the heart-easing love of Isabella and Lorenzo contends with the jostling world" and "impassioned sensibility must yield to the damnation of the real world's fierce destruction" (311). Diana Long Hoeveler deems the tragedy of Isabella and Lorenzo the embodiment of "Keats's worst fears about his class origin . . . and his own anxieties about his identity and future as a poet" (322). Stillinger considers the plot of "Isabella" a degenerating process from romance to realism ("Keats and Romance" 603-604) and Michael LaGory regards the poems as Keats's "awareness of the insufficiency of naïve sentiment" (322). In addition, Cox reads it as Keats's attempt "to explore the privatization of love in a world dominated by the money-getting private enterprise of Isabella's brother" (*KPP* 430). In a more recent essay, he reaffirms that that "Isabella" is about "the 'iron chains' that men with 'hearts of stone' impose on those who dream of something beyond the commercial world" ("John Keats, Medicine, and the Young Men on the Make" 121). Nicholas Roe also suggests that in the poem, "An obvious 'reality' would be to recognise how the brothers' greedy,

bourgeois principles are destructive of romance” (*John Keats: A New Life* 226-227). Most recently, R.S. White approaches the poem from a Freudian perspective, reading “Isabella” as “a detailed analysis of loss, grief, mourning, and melancholia” (139). Nevertheless, White’s examination of Isabella’s negative emotions and pathological symptoms still focuses on the events *after* Lorenzo’s murder. The dualism in “Isabella”—between Isabella/Lorenzo and her brothers, love and commerce, naivety and calculation, passion and reality—has been assumed in major critical discussions of this poem.⁸⁵ However, as I have proposed before, for Keats, erotic love and poetic imagination are in essence negative experiences of self-annihilation. The very destructiveness of the love between Isabella and Lorenzo is not only brought forth by her brothers’ violent interference, but is already present and keeps growing in their relationship. In other words, what Keats accentuates more than the conflict between “the heart easing love” and “the jostling world,” but the innate negativity of the erotic love between Isabella and Lorenzo. For Keats, the power of erotic love does not lie in the fulfilment of desire and its liberation from moral restraints and class barriers, nor does it reinforce human subjectivity and individuality. On the contrary, it is demonstrated in the violent, disruptive, abnormal, and self-destructive aspects of human psyche. In “Isabella,” Keats presents this phenomenon of negativity through a form of pathological poetics.

Such pathological poetics emerges in the very beginning of “Isabella,” which is better highlighted if juxtaposed with his source from *Decameron*.⁸⁶ In Boccaccio’s story, the initial relationship between Isabella and Lorenzo is simple and filled with sheer happiness:

This Lorenzo being of comely personage, affable, and excellent in his behaviour, grew so gracious in the eyes of Isabella, that she

⁸⁵ In *Keats, Modesty, and Masturbation*, Rachel Schulkins also discerns this dualism in existing studies of “Isabella.” Her argument, however, focuses more on the negative effects of excessive desire and “private fantasies of self-fulfilment” in the form of Isabella’s “female masturbation” (73).

⁸⁶ The English translation of *Decameron* here is John Florio’s 1620 version, the first English translation printed and published by Isaac Laggard in London, whose 1680 edition was read by Keats in his time. See Cox’s introduction in *Poetry and Prose*, p. 430. In my discussion, while I am quoting from *Decameron*, the English translation will be referenced in footnotes as “Florio page number,” while the original Italian text “Boccaccio page number.”

afforded him many very respective looks, yea, kindness of no common quality. Which Lorenzo taking notice of, and observing by degrees from time to time, gave over all other beauties in the City, which might allure any affection from him, and onely fixed his heart on her, so that their love grew to a mutuall embracing, both equally respecting one another, and entertaining kindnesses, as occasion gave leave. (Florio 159).

In this passage, from falling in love with each other to potential sexual contact, the couple does not encounter any obstruction. Their interaction is based on mutual affection, corresponding to what Richard Sha calls “idealized as a form of consent and of liberation” (2), with both spiritual and bodily fulfilments. In the first stanza of “Isabella,” however, we see a more complicated representation of this romantic relationship:

Fair Isabel, poor simple Isabel!
Lorenzo, a young palmer in Love's eye!
They could not in the self-same mansion dwell
Without some stir of heart, some malady;
They could not sit at meals but feel how well
It soothed each to be the other by;
They could not, sure, beneath the same roof sleep
But to each other dream, and nightly weep. (1.1-8)

Differing vastly from Boccaccio's positive and swift progression of love, Keats transforms it into a long process of lingering struggles. The word “malady” establishes the idea of love as pathological and anti-living, echoing with the phrases of “sick longing,” “sad plight,” “cheeks paler,” “sick” and “Fever'd” in later stanzas. Here Keats inherits the theme of love as “rig'rous torment” and the idea that “Lovers should nobly suffer pain” in Petrarchan tradition (Petrarch 12, 49), in which the language of love is replete with unfulfilled desire and the mental and bodily suffering it entails. Critics have noted Petrarch's influence on Keats, in terms of both poetic forms and thematic ideas (Myers 101). Petrarchan love, though starting from the poet's agonised longing for Laura's affection, will finally attain consolation by incorporating itself into religious devotion. This is illustrated in *I Trionfi*, which, as A. J. Smith observes, shows a progress from “the miserable frailty and inevitable disillusionment of sexual love to eternal bliss,” because for Petrarch, only “love of God gives them a secure expectation of enduring beauty, lasting love and bliss” (150). While adopting Petrarchan language of love as “sweet

burden, and sweet ill" (Petrarch 125), in "Isabella" Keats exacerbates the physical illness, which does not lead to spiritual consolation at the end of the poem. Furthermore, unlike Petrarchan lovesickness, which is caused by Laura's unresponsiveness and lack of reciprocity, Keatsian pathology in "Isabella" retains its potency even in the couple's mutual affection. It then reminds us of Keats's avid reading of Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, which describes the bodily symptoms of love-melancholy: "paleness, leanness, dryness" and "the body bloodless and pale, a lean body, hollow eyes" (146). In his letter to George and Georgiana in September 1819, Keats cites an entire passage about the blindness of love in Partition 3 "Love-Melancholy" of the *Anatomy* (LK 2.191). In the same section, Burton postulates that "the symptoms of the mind in lovers are almost infinite, and so diverse that no art can comprehend them" and "love is a plague, a torture, an hell" (155). In the first stanza of "Isabella," Keats reiterates such incomprehensibility and pathology of love in the *Anatomy* not only by employing the word "malady," but also by repeating the negative expression of "could not" three times, which generates a sense of uncertainty, the oscillation between truth and untruth, indicating the malignant and oppressive nature of love that is not only beyond the control of human subjectivity, but also threatens it. Such indeterminacy of love has vicious effects on the couple's daily life: they "could not . . . dwell," "could not sit at meal," and "could not . . . sleep." The negative phrase of "could not" insinuates that love endangers and deactivates human functions of basic biological needs: habitation, food, and sleep. Moreover, the negative undertone of love encompasses the sphere of labours, which construct and fortify their social identities. Thus, because "their love grew tenderer," Lorenzo abandons his position in "house, field, or garden," and Isabella "spoilt her half-done broidery" (2.9-16). This depiction suggests that erotic love is the opposite of the secular order of working, which aims to boost production, accumulate resources, and sustain living, resonating with Bataille's three-fold idea of eroticism, sacredness, and art as heterogeneous experiences of violent consumption of lives and resources. The opposition also resounds with

Burton's proposition of "labour, slender and sparing diet, with continual business" as the cure for love-melancholy, as "love retires before business; be busy and you will be safe" (211-2).

To aggravate this problematic nature of erotic love, Keats transforms the prompt sexual union in Boccaccio to a trial of self-doubt and self-affliction before the consummation. Their nameless fear of sex is not caused by a sense of shame imposed by religious or social conventions, as in the cases of other Romantic espousals of sexual passion, but is engendered by a prescience of destruction, as Lorenzo perceives in Stanza 8: "Believe how I love thee, believe how near / My soul is to its doom" (8.60-61). Their hesitation is interwoven by confirmations and doubts; Lorenzo's affirmation of "will I" in his two lines "To-morrow will I bow to my delight, / To-morrow will I ask my lady's boon" is intercepted by Isabella's anxiety expressed by the doubtful "may" and "if" in her following lines: "O may I never see another night, / Lorenzo, if thy lips breathe not love's tune" (4.27-30). The fluctuation between restraint and fulfilment of erotic love once again brings forth pathological symptoms, as Isabella "Fell sick within the rose's just domain, / Fell thin as a young mother's, who doth seek / By every lull to cool her infant's pain" (5.34-35). The image of a young mother worried about her child seems a bizarre simile for Isabella's sickness, which is caused by her ungratified desire for sexual contact with Lorenzo. Keats will again cast Isabella as a mother figure in the digging scene from Stanza 44 to 48 as a symbolic process of childbirth. Keats seems to suggest a problematic relationship between eroticism and reproduction that for women, sexual enjoyment is usually repressed and hindered by the social obligations of propagation and maternal cares.

Seeing Isabella's sickness, Lorenzo expresses his ignorance of its origin, but is again determined to reveal his love for her, and to "drink her tears" and "startle off her cares" (5.39-40). The image of drinking one's tears as love object contains the symbolic meanings of eating and the bodily fluid issued from orifices. We know from Maggie Kilgour's theorisation of cannibalism that eating constitutes the fortification or dissolution of the

somatic boundary between interiority and exteriority. Eating also symbolises the subject's desire to assimilate and incorporate the other. Tears may not have the same taboo qualities as excrements, but like the latter, which are excluded from the body to maintain its physical health, they are ejected from eyes to sustain mental stability. The negative connotations of these two kinds of bodily waste are equivalent. By employing this image of "I will drink her tears" Keats again suggests that erotic love is in essence a negative experience of violent consumption and incorporation.

The scene of the couple's consummation started in Stanza 7 is a manifestation of mutual attraction and affection, but even in this positive depiction of erotic love, certain tinges of self-annihilation can be observed. Keats's revision of this stanza particularly marks this negative undertone. The two original lines that conclude Stanza 7 present Isabella's utterance of active will for this sexual union in a complete sentence: "Lorenzo I would clip my ringlet hair / To make thee laugh again & debonair—" (*PJK* 247). In the final version, however, Keats replaces them with another two lines: "'Lorenzo!'—here she ceas'd her timid quest, / But in her tone and look he read the rest" (7.55-56). Isabella's complete sentence is reduced to a single word "Lorenzo," as she "lisped tenderly" and "ceas'd her timid quest" (7.54-56). The very word "lisped" signifies Isabella's aphasic status, her loss of language ability, in the ensuing sexual interaction. Keats's revision deprives Isabella of her original active voice and action; she becomes an object of Lorenzo's masculine gaze, subject to his power of arbitrary interpretation—"in her tone and look he read the rest." But even as an active suitor, Lorenzo is "anguished" and "very pale and dead," once again insinuating Keatian pathology of erotic love. Though he still retains his language ability, compared to Isabella's lisping, what he articulates with words is the prescience of self-destruction in erotic love: "Believe how I love thee, believe how near / My soul is to its doom" (8.60-61). In this apparently positive scene of mutual affection, we can still perceive potential negativity of erotic love, which not only affects physicality, but also disables language. Moreover, it threatens the very internal selfhood—"My soul"—that is the centre of human

autonomy and individuality.

Keats's depiction of the actual sexual contact is in the final four lines of Stanza 9, with only two lines describing the bodily actions:

So said, his erewhile timid lips grew bold,
And poesied with hers in dewy rhyme:
Great bliss was with them, and great happiness
Grew, like a lusty flower in June's caress. (9.69-72)

Keats restrains his narration by reducing the contact to a mere gesture of kiss, leaving what is left for the reader's imagination. The last two lines of this stanza about the couple's "Great bliss" and "great happiness" seem to redirect the previous course of amorous struggles to its supposed romance end of fulfilment, but this does not annul the ambiguity and the violent undercurrents in the erotic relationship between Isabella and Lorenzo in the previous stanzas. The most significant part in this passage is the verb "poesied," which means "to produce poetry," according the *Oxford English Dictionary* ("poesy, v") with this usage of Keats as the only example. His unique and exclusive coinage of this verb as an equivalent of kissing reflects again his idea of the "material sublime" that emphasises the crucial status of the body in artistic creation. The word "poesied," therefore, also represents his equation of poetic creation and eroticism.

The ominous Stanza 12 and Stanza 13 pave the way for the upcoming tragedy brought forth by Isabella's two brothers. Keats raises a question about the couple's happiness: "Were they unhappy then?" followed by an immediate answer "—It cannot be—" with a strong sense of doubt with those two dashes. The reason that Isabella and Lorenzo must be happy is because

Too many tears for lovers have been shed,
Too many sighs give we to them in fee,
Too much of pity after they are dead,
Too many doleful stories do we see (12.90-93)

In these lines, Keats alludes bitterly to the sensational effects of romance tradition. Readers of romance, alongside the protagonists with whom they identify, suffer all these "Too many" and "Too much" in exchange for the final happy conclusion of romance. All the excessive "tears," "sighs," "pity" and "doleful stories" are the price to pay for the final wish-fulfilment. The more

intense the suffering is, the sweeter the outcome will be. In “Isabella,” however, Keats counters this tradition and breaks the economy of emotional exchange that it represents, in order to “find the agonies, the strife / Of human hearts,” as he declares in “Sleep and Poetry.” In Keats’s “alternative romance,” pain is not the price for or foil of pleasure, but itself the very source of alternative pleasure, as he affirms this “truth” in Stanza 13 that “Even bees, the little almsmen of spring-bowers, / Know there is richest juice in poison-flowers” (13.103-104), echoing Blake’s line “Sweetest the fruit that the worm feeds on & the soul prey’d on by woe” (*CPPB* 47) in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Both poets indicate the sadomasochist pleasure generated and intensified by bodily and mental sufferings.

The Greco-Roman counterparts of Isabella—Ariadne and Dido—that Keats employs in these two stanzas further complicates the romantic love between her and Lorenzo. The tragic outcomes of Ariadne’s and Dido’s loves for Theseus and Aeneas are not caused by exterior interference such as Isabella’s brothers, but by the two heroes’ own decisions to abandon their lovers. It seems strange, therefore, if Ariadne/Dido corresponds to Isabella and Theseus/Aeneas corresponds to Lorenzo, because in terms of the plot, the relationship between Isabella and Lorenzo is ultimately ruined by an outer force. The reference to the two superficially unfitting tragic heroines not only reinforces Keats’s challenge of the wish-fulfilling romance tradition, but also implies that the love between Isabella and Lorenzo is already problematic before the brothers’ violent intervention. In addition, unlike Boccaccio, who opens the story with “In Messina there dwelt three young men, Brethren, and Merchants by their common profession, who becoming very rich by the death of their Father, lived in very good fame and repute” (Florio 160), not until Stanza 14 does Keats introduce Isabella’s two brothers and their wealth and enterprise. This arrangement suggests that though the brothers’ intervention physically separates Isabella and Lorenzo and intensifies the heroine’s deterioration, the pre-existing pathology within the couple’s romantic relationship is equally significant.

Keats’s depiction of the two brothers from Stanza 14 to Stanza 17

evokes George Bernard Shaw's famous remark: "If Karl Marx can be imagined as writing a poem instead of a treatise on Capital, he would have written 'Isabella'" (175). Wolfson regards these "capitalist stanzas" as Keats's deliberate digression, through which "literary and commercial riches, literary taste and commercial venture, wind up on the same axis of imagery" (*Reading John Keats* 257). Kurt Heinzelman stresses Keats's innovation in these stanzas, as the "institutionalized capitalism described in 'Isabella' is foreign to Boccaccio's Italy" (162), Keats's modification of the number of Isabella's brothers from three to two is also noted, as LaGory argues that it intensifies "the contrast between brothers and lovers" and the former are of a "barren relationship" that "brings forth only money" (325). However, despite the apparent dichotomy between the sophisticated and ruthless commercialism and the "naïve sentiment/innocent love," which is rather problematic before being obstructed by the brothers, Keats eroticises the brothers' reaction to the relationship between Isabella and Lorenzo:

How was it these same ledger-men could spy
 Fair Isabella in her downy nest?
 How could they find out in Lorenzo's eye
 A straying from his toil? (18.137-140)

Deviating from Boccaccio's story, in which the eldest brother accidentally sees Isabella sneaking to Lorenzo's place, Keats subtly replaces this decisive and concrete incident with ambiguous speculations. The disclosure of the amorous affair does not, as in Boccaccio, result from Isabella's coincidental recklessness, but is the necessary outcome of the brothers' habitual voyeurism on their sister, and with a homoerotic hint, on Lorenzo. After two stanzas of digression apologising to Boccaccio, Keats resumes his narrative of the brothers' action. They confide to each other their "bitter thoughts" that are "well nigh mad" over the fact that Lorenzo "Should in their sister's love be blithe and glad" (21.164-166). Indeed, Keats makes it clear that the brothers' "bitter thoughts" originate from their "plan to coax her by degrees / To some high noble and his olive-trees" (21.167-168). However, in the next stanza, he suggests that in addition to the pragmatic reason of seeing Isabella as a commodity to propel their economic exchanges, the

brothers' frustration and anger result from their erotic attachment to both Isabella and Lorenzo, as "many a *jealous* [emphasis added] conference had they" (22.169). With the brothers' voyeurism and jealousy, fixing upon both Isabella and Lorenzo, Keats perplexes their murderous motive and subtly undermines the dualism between erotic love and capitalist calculation assumed by many critics.

Keats's pathological poetics of eroticism continues in the murder scene. As they walk deep into the forest, "Sick and wan / The brothers' faces in the ford did seem" (27.213-214). The brothers' "Sick and wan" complexions resound with the "sick longing" and "cheeks paler" of Isabella and Lorenzo in the prime of their love. After they slay Lorenzo, the brothers "dipp'd their swords in the water" and ride homeward "with convulsed spur" (28.222-223). The image of phallic swords penetrating into the soft and receptive water is a metaphorical picture of sexual violence, and the ecstatic state of "convulsed spur" overlaps sexual pleasure with murder and death. Keats's eroticisation of the murder scene, extended from the simple description in Boccaccio's story—"they ran sodainly upon Lorenzo, slew him, and afterward entered his body, where hardly it could be discovered by anyone" (Florio 160)—corresponds to the brothers' ambiguous complex for Isabella and Lorenzo that is engendered by Keats's deliberate designs of voyeurism and jealousy. Again, we can observe that Keats connects erotic love with sickness, violence, and even death.

Isabella's reaction to the ill news of Lorenzo's disappearance also highlights Keats's deviation from Boccaccio. In Boccaccio's story, Isabella "fell into abundance of tears, where-among she mingled many sighes and groanes, such as were able to overthrow a farre stronger constitution: so that, being full of feare and dismay" (Florio 160). The pathological effects of erotic love appear for the first time in Boccaccio's Isabella because of the absence of her love object. Keats, however, apart from continuing the pre-existing pathological poetics, presents a double-layered structure of pain and pleasure in Stanza 30:

She weeps alone for pleasures not to be;
Sorely she wept until the night came on,

And then, instead of love, O misery!
She brooded o'er the luxury alone:
His image in the dusk she seem'd to see,
And to the silence made a gentle moan,
Spreading her perfect arms upon the air,
And on her couch low murmuring "Where? O where?"
(30.233-240)

R. S. White interprets this passage as a typical Freudian pattern of grief and mourning (143). But I also observe Keats's deliberate indication of autoeroticism. After enduring sheer sorrow for the absent love in the day, in the night Isabella indulges in "luxury." In this context, "luxury" does not mean extravagant dress, furniture, or food. It also differs from Keats's earlier usage of the word in "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill"—"a posey, / Of luxuries bright, milky, soft and rosy" (27-28 *PJK* 80)—that represents "the qualities of whiteness, elegance, brightness, daintiness, gentleness," as Jean H. Hagstrum points out (43). Tontiplaphol regards Keats's "luscious poem" as the embodiment of the nineteenth-century "poetics of luxury," which focuses on "tactile and oral experiences," "rich indulgences nourished by the proximity that attends touching and tasting," and "circumscribed spaces crowded with sensory stimuli" (*Poetics of Luxury* 7-8). Stemming from such somatic and sensory connotations, "luxury" here goes beyond mere extravagant dress, furniture, or food, and denotes lasciviousness and lust, as Rachel Schulkins also agrees that "luxury" represents "her dream of sexual consummation with Lorenzo's image" (81). The association between autoeroticism and Keats can be traced as early as Byron's derogatory comment on his works as "the Onanism of poetry" and "a sort of mental masturbation" and Keats himself a "miserable Self-polluter of the human Mind" (Byron and Moore 217, 225). Marjorie Levinson proposes that Byron's remarks suggest "the subjective vacancy of Keats's writing," the internal emptiness beneath the latter's poetic language of "finery" (16). In her discussion of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," Levinson further points out that the age's fear of masturbation lies in its "image of productive self-alienation" (46). Though she does not take this passage in "Isabella" into consideration, Isabella's autoerotic "luxury" conforms to Levinson's observation of the

poem's sentiment as "the self-conscious feeling of *having* a feeling: a reflexive address to a fetishized feeling" (144). It also evokes Marianne Dashwood's painful disorder after being abandoned by John Willoughby in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, published a few years before Keats's volume that contains "Isabella." In Marianne's similar traumatic experience of her love object's absence, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick discerns her erotic identity as "the masturbating girl," which is beyond the conventional categorisation of heterosexual and homosexual relationships (395). This heterogeneous identity of autoeroticism, in her agitation and "excessive affliction," finds a violent outlet in literary creation, a sort of imaginary interaction with her lost love object: "writing as fast as a continual flow of tears would permit her . . . for the last time to Willoughby" (Austen 127). In Stanza 30, Keats has the heroine call for the feeling for her love object's absence and picture Lorenzo's image, in order to have an imaginary consummation with it, as she "made a gentle moan, / Spreading her perfect arms upon the air" (30.238-239). Her autoerotic complex, confirmed by the capitalised "Selfishness" in the opening line of the next stanza, is produced by poetic imagination, echoing Marianne's hysterical writing to Willoughby. In this typical Keatsian trance, Isabella undergoes a process of self-disintegration, splits her subject into two to form an image of her lover for the masturbatory "luxury alone." Isabella's sorrow in the day, which is a justified emotion that constitutes positive romantic love, contrasts with her obscene pleasure in the night, which is pathological, autoerotic, anti-social, and unnameable.

Isabella's dream vision of Lorenzo's ghost is "a thing more deadly dark than all" that "came like a fierce potion, drunk by chance, / Which saves a sick man from the feather'd pall / For some few gasping moments" (34.266-269). In these lines, Keats has already predicted the eventual state that Isabella will be in, which is a liminal limbo between the living and the dead. Lorenzo's appearance is exactly a representation of this liminality. At Isabella's first glance, his once "glossy hair" is marred by "the forest tomb," his limb is covered by "cold doom," and his voice is no longer "soft lute"

(35.275-278). But “there was striving, in its piteous tongue” (36.282) when the ghost speaks, and it is still “music” that reminds Isabella of Lorenzo when he is still “on earth.” Keats depicts this “music” with double similes:

Langour there was in it, and tremulous shake,
As in a palsied Druid’s harp unstrung;
And through it moan’d a ghostly under-song,
Like hoarse night-gusts sepulchral briars among. (36.285-288)

The words “languor” and “palsied Druid’s harp” evoke a sense of pagan erotic rituals. Lorenzo’s voice, the “music” heard by Isabella, is a moaning “ghostly under-song” that flows among “sepulchral briars.” In these lines, Keats weaves together eroticism and death, presenting Lorenzo’s ghost as a liminal figure fluctuating between the lingering desire, which is the affirmation of life, and the insensibility and decadence of death: “Its eyes, though wild, were still all dewy bright / With love, and kept all phantom fear aloof” (37.289-290). Such liminality is confirmed by Lorenzo’s self-lamentation in Stanza 39, revealing that he is now a “shadow” dwelling on “the skirts of human-nature” and seeing Isabella “distant in Humanity” (39.305, 312). Lorenzo’s ghost reminds us of the “Ditch water, and the fever-stricken flesh” in *The Cenci*, as they all share the propensity of “half-identity” that blends attraction and repulsion, pleasure and pain, desire and horror, inclusion and exclusion, what Tilottama Rajan defines as “emotional indeterminacy” (101).

In Stanza 40, after disclosing the murder, Lorenzo’s ghost takes heed of Isabella’s decaying outward features, which is another deviation from Boccaccio’s account. Her suffering, surprisingly, pleases him: “That paleness warms my grave . . . thy paleness makes me glad; / Thy beauty grows upon me, and I feel / A greater love through all my essence steal” (40.316-320). Lorenzo feels comforted and satisfied to see Isabella pining away because of him. Remembering Keats’s remark of “Selfishness” on Isabella’s nightly autoeroticism, we can observe here another manifestation of selfishness. Instead of an ideal depiction of love as self-sacrificing affection for the other, Keats through an unreal dream vision presents a realistic observation of erotic love as selfish and possessive. Daniel P. Watkins notes that in this dream, by learning the cause of Lorenzo’s death, Isabella “is ‘school’d’ in the

harsh reality of human crime, in the way politics controls even the most private experience and commitments (40). But at the same time, she and the reader is “school’d” by the complicated reality of erotic love, which is far from the naïve sentiment of mutual affection. Once again Keats insinuates that although the physical separation and the deprivation of love are caused by the brothers’ violent interference, there is innate negativity in such a romantic relationship.

In the digging scene from Stanza 44 to 48, Keats’s unique design again deviates from Boccaccio’s story. This design is based on two modifications. First, in Florio’s translation, the one who accompanies Isabella to the forest is “her trusty Nurse, who long time had attended on her in the house, and knew the secret passages of her love” (Florio 161). In Boccaccio’s original Italian, she is only *una* (Boccaccio 750)—a woman, or “a female one”—without any other physical descriptions. Keats takes liberty, as Florio does, to make *una* “an aged nurse” (43.343). Second, in Florio’s translation and Boccaccio’s original account, the whole process of digging does not take much time and effort, as “they digged not farre”—*né ebbe guari cavato* (Boccaccio 750)—“but they found the body of murdered Lorenzo” (Florio 161). However, in Keats’s version, it is a long and strenuous trial that lasts for three hours: “Three hours they labour’d at this travail sore” (48.382). Watkins interprets Keats’s design in Stanza 48 as a representation of “manual labour under oppressive condition” and “caricature of the relations of production” (41). Louise Z. Smith notes that “her eager digging” reminds readers of the brothers’ greed (309). Kurt Heinzelman sees in Isabella an image of “a miser prodigiously digging up his hoard” (165). In addition to these readings, the entire digging scene has a symbolic meaning. Keats’s modification of “trusty Nurse” and “a woman (*una*)” to “an aged nurse” evokes an image of midwife, noted by LaGory as the “descendent of Juliet’s Nurse and Spenser’s Glause” (329). Moreover, his usage of the words “labour” and “travail”—“a dismal labouring” and “Three hours they labour’d at this travail sore”—reinforces this implication. That is, Keats presents Isabella excavating Lorenzo’s corpse with the help of a nurse/midwife as a potential process of childbirth. That Isabella

is both love object and mother figure for Lorenzo seems to predate the Oedipal familial procedure. And the eroticism of latent mother-son incest is suggested strongly by Keats in Stanza 47, where Isabella kisses the corpse

. . . with a lip more chill than stone,
And put it in her bosom, where it dries
And freezes utterly unto the bone
Those dainties made to still an infant's cries (47.371-374)

Douglas Bush notes that for earlier critics these lines “embodied all the poignancy of thwarted motherhood” but Keats’s “amatory falsetto of ‘dainties’” spoils this idea (78). Similarly, critics such as C. L. Finney and Amy Lowell consider the word “dainties” infelicitous, vulgar, and inappropriate in the context of a tragic death (Finney 377). LaGory reads this quasi-breastfeeding scene as not only “thwarted motherhood” but also “thwarted sexual love” and the destined failure of “sexual love unperplexed from marital love and parenthood” (328). What Keats presents through this scene from Stanza 43 to 48 is how erotic love generates the affinity between life and death, as Hoeveler perceives correctly that the scene “might have been written by someone who could only imagine birth as a form of death” (333), and how it dissolves the social boundary constructed by incest taboo.

Through the metaphorical images of childbirth and breastfeeding, Keats defies the maternal obligation of reproduction, mixing delivery throes with the perverse pleasure of oral eroticism on Isabella’s breasts. In Stanza 47, her breasts do not produce milk, the necessary, nonsexual, socially approved subsistence for infants, which are the fruits of reproduction and the guarantee of human existence. As the bodily zone of mutually exclusive maternity and eroticism, the image of Isabella’s breasts responds to the social antithesis stemming from the eighteenth-century “Cult of Domesticity,” an ideology that ideal motherhood and successful propagation must exclude any trace of female sexual desire (Nussbaum 24-25). Isabella’s milk-less “dainties” thus subverts this ideal, and signify the idea of unnecessary, anti-living, and excessive consumption of erotic love, so intimate to “the horrid thing” and approximating to the experience of death.

In Stanza 49, Keats digresses to a personal reflection on the disparity

between “this wormy circumstance” of Isabella and “the gentleness of old Romance, / the simple plaining of a minstrel’s song!” (49.387-388). A similar disparity can be seen in “Sleep and Poetry,” as discussed previously, and in “On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again.” In both poems, Keats aspires to dismiss romance; he says farewell to “flowery bays” and “o’erwhelming sweet” in the former, and bids “golden-tongue romance” to “Shut up thine olden pages, and be mute” in the latter (*PJK* 225). In “Isabella,” this stanza of digression once again distances the poem from the genre of romance. Furthermore, unlike “a nobler life” and more than “the fierce dispute / Betwixt damnation and impassion’d clay,” it is a “wormy circumstance” displayed in “Isabella.” Despite the sudden stop of narrative, Keats’s word choice of “wormy” duly sums up the previous digging scene and Isabella’s following actions. “Wormy” means not only “resembling a worm, worm-like” (“wormy, adj4”) but also “of earth, soil, the grave” and “infested with worms, full of worms” (“wormy, adj3”) as defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. On the one hand, the word alludes to the calculation and cruelty of Isabella’s brothers. On the other hand, it reflects the sensuousness of decadence and death and the eroticism generated by Isabella’s intimacy with Lorenzo’s corpse. Though aiming to “find the agonies, the strife / Of human hearts,” Keats displays darker aspects, a less “nobler life” of human suffering. He reveals the often obscene/off-stage reality of tragedy, which is the abjectness and decadence of physical death, and eroticises this unsightliness, “this wormy circumstance,” to represent again the alternative pleasure of endangered subjectivity and disintegrated self. Furthermore, in the last line of Stanza 49, Keats invites the “Fair reader” to relish this alternative pleasure, to “taste the music of that vision pale” (49.391), by combining three somatic sensations—gustatory, auditory, and visual. As in Stanza 9 where Lorenzo’s lips “poesied” Isabella’s “in dewy rhyme” (9.70), in Stanza 49 Keats manifests the intense correlation between poetic imagination and erotic love, and how its “intensity”—a word for Keats signifying the artistic drive moving constantly away from “that is fundamental to our general awareness of life” (Sperry, “The Epistle” 588) and “a power to

generate in an audience a strong and comprehensive response, which sometimes includes erotic overtones” (Radcliffe 257)—becomes highest when dealing with the obscene human experiences that are pathological, anti-living, and self-destructive.

After unearthing Lorenzo’s body, Isabella severs its head with “duller steel than the Perséan sword” (50.393). There has been ample critical discussion about the decapitation’s significance, especially about Keats’s replacement of the omitted phrase “no foul Medusa’s head” with “no formless monster’s head” (50.394). Louise Z. Smith argues that the change “complements the ‘duller steel’ by emphasising that these are real people, not mythical fantasies (309). Hoeveler reads the decapitation as still a variation of castration reflecting Keats’s own anxiety, despite the deletion of “foul Medusa’s head” (332). Aside from these interpretations, I would highlight a minute and unnoticed, but subtle omission of Boccaccio’s original description. In Florio’s translation of this passage, despite such a profound distress,

Wisedome and government so much prevailed with her, as to instruct her soule, that her teares spent there, were meerley fruitless and in vaine, neither did the time require any longer tarrying there. Gladly would she have carried the whole body with her, secretly to bestow honourable enterment on it, but it exceeded the compasse of her ability (Florio 161).

In Keats’s source, Isabella’s decision to decapitate Lorenzo’s corpse is based on concrete reasons. She acknowledges that her excessive grief in this moment provides no practical help, and she is fully aware of her inability to carry her lover’s entire body away. This highly functional reasoning is supported by her “Wisedome and government.”⁸⁷ In other words, Isabella severs Lorenzo’s head because she *has to*, because it is *necessary*, in a context of reality and pragmatism. By disregarding this original account, and

⁸⁷ “Wisedome and government” in Florio’s translation has no corresponding phrase in Boccaccio’s original Italian, which, nevertheless, accounts for Isabella’s reasons for decapitating Lorenzo’s corpse, as she “conoscendo che quivi non era da piagnere, se avesse potuto volentieri tutto il corpo n’avrebbe portato per dargli più convenevole sepoltura; ma, veggendo che ciò esser non poteva” (Boccaccio 750)—“she was aware that tears were not helpful here. If she was able to, she wished to bring the whole body back for a more proper burial, but she saw that could not be done” (my translation).

by directly presenting the decapitation without any reasons, Keats deprives Isabella of her “Wisedome and government.” In “Isabella,” the decapitation is no longer a practical and necessary resort reached by Isabella’s reasoning, but only a manifestation of her sheer erotic obsession that follows her pathological signs and leads to her eventual madness. In terms of this omission, the transition from Boccaccio’s story/Florio’s translation to “Isabella” the poem indicates that for Keats, versification, or poetical creation, is an erotic process of forsaking “Wisedome and government”—instrumental reason and self-control—and deteriorating into madness and oblivion.

The subsequent scene focuses on Isabella’s interactions with the severed head, “whose gentleness did well accord / With death, as life” (50.395-396). She cleans the head, places it in the pot of “Sweet Basil,” and nourishes it with her tears. This series of necrophiliac actions, as the central part of “Isabella,” has already generated abundant critical interpretations. Louise Z. Smith reads Isabella’s tears here as “regenerative grief” that “prevents Isabella from being destroyed” and her cleaning as “artistic devotion” (310). She concludes that the basil’s flourishing represents, to some extent, the eternity of love, and “Isabella and her plant are immortalized in legend” (311). Watkins views Isabella’s actions as “abstractions which stand above the injustice and contradictions of social life” that achieve “spiritual truth” (41). Radcliffe observes another form of the “deep desire for idealized objects” and highlights the danger of worshipping them blindly (257). Referring to Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, Hoeveler regards the head as a “partial object . . . the essence of fetishism” and as “a seed in a pod, a child in a perpetually growing womb,” signifying that “Isabella has eroticized her abjection” (334). White maintains that Isabella’s behaviours attest to Freudian melancholia, as Lorenzo’s head functions as a “substitute object” for her lost lover (144). According to the above interpretations, except perhaps Hoeveler’s, Isabella’s actions constitute a form of artistic creation that revives and preserves her romantic love in an alternative and psychotic manner. Isabella’s “work” of the pot of basil as a piece of art transcends the social context of her misery, as well as time and

space, and eternalises itself in both Boccaccio's and Keats's literary texts. Agreeing that Isabella's actions represent a form of "artistic devotion," I would further propose that they embody Keats's notion of writing poetry, and exemplify his idea of the "material sublime," and thus corroborating to my major argument of this chapter—for Keats, poetic imagination is in essence an erotic process of self-annihilation.

In my reading of "Epistle to John Hamilton Reynolds," I have argued that the phrase "material sublime" evokes Keats's possible medical construal of the word "material" as pertaining to corporeal disease, which then symbolises general human suffering, especially in a somatic sense. Furthermore, that poetic imagination is "yet still confin'd, / Lost in a sort of Purgatory blind" points to Keats's understanding that poetry does not stand for an alternative epistemological order other than reason and science to redeem human suffering. Poetry, on the contrary, aestheticises and eroticises them to generate "obscene" and negative pleasures. In Isabella's case, her treatments of Lorenzo's head not only stand for an idealisation of love object that preaches a superficial motto: "Love never dies, but lives, immortal Lord" (50.397). Lorenzo's head is the raw material for the poet Isabella/Keats, representing the ultimate outcome of human suffering, the primitive source of the sublime—death. Isabella/Keats beautifies death, "the horrid thing," with bodily and "material" poetics. In this exact embodiment of the "material sublime," she "kiss'd it, and low moan'd" (50.399), tidies up its hairs "with a golden comb" (51.403), and

Then in a silken scarf,—sweet with the dews
Of precious flowers pluck'd in Araby,
And divine liquids come with odorous ooze
Through the cold serpent-pipe refreshfully,—
She wrapp'd it up; and for its tomb did choose
A garden-pot, wherein she laid it by,
And cover'd it with mould, and o'er it set
Sweet basil, which her tears kept ever wet. (52.409-416)

Isabella/Keats's versification of death as a poetic subject is based on erotic contacts, bodily fluid, and material luxuries, contradicting what Watkins regards as "her very dearest hope and sincerest spirituality" (41). Conceptually, Keats is anticipating the last stanza of "Ode on Melancholy," in

which Beauty must die, Joy is forever bidding adieu, Pleasure comes with poison, and “him whose strenuous tongue / Can burst Joy’s grape against his palate fine” (21-23, 27-28). For Isabella, Lorenzo (Beauty) is dead and her desire (Joy and Pleasure) is mingled with poisonous madness. She, as a “poet,” “writes a poem” on Lorenzo’s head with somatic fluid and contacts, echoing the “strenuous tongue” that bursts Joy’s grape, a potential image of laceration of flesh and its overflowing fluid.

As Isabella falls into utter oblivion of space and time, forgetting “the stars, the moon, and sun,” “the blue above the trees,” “the dells where waters run,” and “the chilly autumn breeze,” and fails to recognise “when the day was done” (53.417-421). Such a symptom is Keats’s self-awareness of and fear for poetic creation as a descent into the realm of “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts” (*LK* 1.193), where “I am in a very little time annihilated” (*LK* 1.387). Moreover, the symptom of oblivion and self-annihilation extends from the mental to the physical. The poetic images of Isabella’s erotic contacts with Lorenzo’s head, her bodily fluid and material luxuries are all images of excessive consumption. Exploiting them means the self-wasting of bodily energy and resources. Consequently, Isabella as a poet “is soon to be / Among the dead: She withers, like a palm / Cut by an Indian for its juicy balm” (56.446-448). Her artistic creation of “the pot of basil” attests to my argument that for Keats, writing poetry is itself a pathological and erotic process of self-annihilation, mentally and physically. Echoing Keats’s confession to Reynolds that “never will the prize, / High reason, and the lore of good and ill / Be my award” (*LK* 1.262), the line “And then the prize was all for Isabel” (51.502) suggests that what a poet can achieve through poetry is poetry itself, not an alternative “spiritual truth” complementing the rationalist, scientific, and moral truths. For Keats, poetry does not aim to signify a timeless epistemological order that transcends history, or to reflect the historical context of his time. Poetry itself is both signifier and its signified; it opens a disruptive cavity in the very moment of writing, deviating from the linear process of narrative. In such a heterogeneous space the poet relinquishes his previous identity and indulges in a ceaseless cycle of erotic

desire—from lingering pursuit, temporary fulfilment, to ultimate denial, and over again, and again—as in Isabella’s creation of “the pot of basil” and Keats’s creation of “Isabella.”

In this section, I have postulated how *Isabella* embodies Keats’s equation of erotic love and poetic imagination as both self-annihilating experiences. Keats himself is perhaps aware of the highly heterogeneous nature of this poem, as he describes it as “mawkish” (*LK*. 2.162) and “too smokable” (*LK* 2.174). The word “mawkish,” meaning the inclination to sickness and feeble sentiments, reflects Keats’s awareness of the pathological poetics that is vulnerable to ridicule for its apparent “effeminacy.” But by insinuating a series of unhealthy and malignant signs imbued in the “romantic” relationship between Isabella and Lorenzo with such pathological poetics, Keats downplays the brothers’ exterior interference and underlines the innate negativity in erotic love, as well as poetic imagination. In the later part of the poem, Isabella’s necrophiliac treatments of Lorenzo’s head also epitomise Keats’s idea of the “material sublime” and represent a somatic form of poetic creation. My examination of “Isabella” demonstrates the “obscene” phenomenon of self-annihilation in Romantic eroticism, and in Keats’s ideas and works, such “obscenity” is entailed in writing poetry itself.

“THE EVE OF ST. AGNES” AND KEATSIAN SACREDNESS OF EROTIC LOVE

In his letter to John Taylor in September 1819, Richard Woodhouse expresses his concerns for Keats’s revisions of “The Eve of St. Agnes,” which he calls “trifling alterations” (*LK* 2.162). The negative effects of such alterations, however, are indeed not trivial for Woodhouse. In this letter, he first identifies in the inclusion of Angela’s grotesque death, which generates “a sense of pettish disgust,” a mischievous design of “mingling up sentiment & sneering” to “play with his reader” (*LK* 2.162-163). He then targets Keats’s treatment of Porphyro’s final encounter with the sleeping Madeline, criticising the poet for suggesting a premarital consummation between the couple, which renders the poem “unfit for ladies” (*LK* 2.163). Woodhouse observes that even without direct sexual depiction, Keats entices the reader’s indecent

imagination. He refers to Keats's own words that "he does not want ladies to read his poetry: that he writes for men" and that "he should despise a man who would be such a eunuch in sentiment as to leave a <Girl> maid, with that Character about her, in such a situation" (*LK* 2.163). If Woodhouse's record of Keats's words is true, through "The Eve of St. Agnes" the poet not only espouses sexual fulfilment by deriding "He who desires, but acts not" (*CPPB* 35), in Blake's words, but also promotes a male-centred form of such fulfilment, an issue that engenders the subsequent divided readings of this poem.

In the earlier stages of modern Keats studies, the interpretations of "The Eve of St. Agnes" are divided into two categories, based on the critical judgment of sexual fulfilment between Porphyro and Madeline, especially the former's actions. First, there is the so-called "idealist" reading that holds positive evaluation of the sexual union between Porphyro and Madeline, as a form of typical Romantic mutual affection that prevails over social restrictions represented by the two hostile families. The idealist reading is developed by Earl R. Wasserman in his 1953 monograph *The Finer Tone: Keats's Major Poems*. In his interpretation, Porphyro's venture into Madeline's house stands as a pilgrimage, a quest for "heaven's bourne, where the intensities of mortal life are repeated in a finer tone and divested of their mutability" (120). Basing his argument on Keats's reference to Adam's dream in *Paradise Lost*, Wasserman equalises dreams with imagination, and regards Madeline's awakening to meet and elope with Porphyro as an actualisation of Romantic imagination that leads them into "where the human and ethereal, beauty and truth, are one" (123). That is, Wasserman does not distinguish the real Porphyro and the Porphyro in Madeline's dream; the two "should fuse mystically into an immortality of passionate experience, as warmly human as the one yet as immutable as the other" (123). The second category of interpretations of "The Eve of St. Agnes," contrary to the idealist reading, is the sceptical reading led by Jack Stillinger's influential essay "The Hoodwinking of Madeline: Scepticism in 'The Eve of St. Agnes.'" Stillinger deems the apparently Romantic fulfilment of erotic love a potential rape,

orchestrated by Porphyro with his opportunist “stratagem,” which is “a ruse, an artifice, a trick of deceiving” (“The Hoodwinking” 539). Rejecting Wasserman’s metaphysical reading, Stillinger brings the plot back to Madeline’s realistic condition, in which “Porphyro is cruel; Angela is a traitor; and Madeline is a ‘deceived thing’” (546). He accentuates Keats’s juxtaposition of Porphyro with villainous characters such as Tereus who rapes Philomel, Milton’s Satan, and Iachimo in *Cymbeline*, maintaining that Porphyro’s venture is not a form of spiritual pilgrimage, but a morally depraved action that, to some extent, embodies Keats’s own male sexual desire, expressed in his letter to Bailey—“When I am among Women I have evil thoughts, malice spleen” (LK 1.341). The studies of “The Eve of St. Agnes” following this division between idealism and scepticism, as Stillinger observes in his later book *Reading “the Eve of St. Agnes”: The Multiples of Complex Literary Transaction*, all attempt to find a middle ground somewhere between Wasserman’s and Stillinger’s polarised arguments.

Instead of attempting another moral judgment of Porphyro’s action, the analysis of “The Eve of St. Agnes” in this section continues my major argument established in the preceding section. I approach Keatsian “obscenity” in this poem through a different angle, namely, Keats’ synthesis of the religious and the erotic. In Keats studies, the interrelationship between sexual love and religion in “The Eve of St. Agnes” has been noted and discussed. Some critics affirm the sexual union in the poem as a celebration of Christian marriage. For example, Katharine Garvin argues that St. Agnes represents “a mythical marriage” free from mundane contamination, and Madeline is a “humanized Agnes” whose sexual union with Porphyro confirms a realisation of heavenly bliss in the corporeal world. (360). David Wiener reads the elopement as a secular version of *felix culpa*, which leads the couple away from an innocent but inert paradise to a harsher but enlightened world of experience. From a similar perspective, James Boulger interprets Madeline’s ritual as a secular version of the Eucharist, with which Romantic love is fulfilled through Keats’s handling of religious images. Conversely, other critics consider the sexual love a countermeasure against

the ascetic tradition and the concept of purity in Christianity. Instead of actualising the idea of Christian marriage, Keats's allusions to paganism and "old religion" in the couple's interaction challenge and surpass Christianity. For instance, Judith Arcana observes in the poem an embodiment of early Celtic sacred ritual by identifying certain archetypal figures: Madeline as the mother-to-be maiden, Angela as the crone, the guiding priestess, Porphyro as the young god of love, and the Beadsman as the powerless representation of Christianity (43). Marcia Gilbreath traces the etymology of Porphyro's name and finds his counterpart Porphyron in Joseph Spence's *Polymetis*, Abbé Banier's *Mythology and Fables of the Ancients*, and Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Combining the characterisations in these documents, Gilbreath deems Porphyro "a young pagan ravisher with no regard for the religious taboo he is breaking" against "the barren religious ideal of sexual purity" in Christianity (25).⁸⁸

Departing from the dichotomy between Christianity and paganism assumed in the existing studies, I propose that Keats does not stress the antithesis between Christianity and paganism in the poem. In contrast, he construes religious sacredness as a heterogeneous experience of eroticism in both Christian and non-Christian contexts. First, the ritual of St. Agnes's Eve signifies Keats's eroticisation of Christian images, which reincorporates sexual desire into the concepts of resurrection and the second coming of Jesus. This is particularly manifested by the image of "no weeping Magdalen" in the deleted stanza between Stanza 6 and 7, a biblical reference neglected by most critics who discuss the poem from Christian perspectives, such as Garvin, Wiener, and Boulger. By eroticising Christian images, Keats aspires to an alternative divine experience of sexual vitality, opposite to the weak and sterile state represented by the Beadsman's asceticism. Second, with pagan images such as Merlin, the mermaid, and Medusa in the later part of the poem Keats complicates the interaction between Madeline and Porphyro, which is more than an embodiment of typical romantic love or a potential

⁸⁸ For more details of the existing studies based on the division between Christianity and paganism, see Stillinger's summary in *Reading of "the Eve of St. Agnes"*, p. 42-65.

rape. It dissolves the power relationship between the two protagonists maintained in the sceptical reading. There is not differentiation between the active male subject (Porphyro) and the passive female object (Madeline) or the boundary between the victimiser and the victim. Both parties relieve the control of their bodies and transcend their pre-existing identities in this erotic state accessed via a religious ritual. "The Eve of St. Agnes" shows a unique aspect of Keats's idea of religious sacredness, which is essentially sensual and erotic, and offers an alternative angle to approach the poet's understanding of religion and its connection to poetic creation. With this poem, Keats postulates his idea of the sacred as a heterogeneous experience of self-annihilation, which shares the same root and mechanism of eroticism and poetic imagination.

Before starting my analysis of the narrative poem, in which a religious, and specifically Christian, motif is the prominent impetus of the entire plot, it is necessary to review the possible construction of Keats's religious views of Christianity. What influenced Keats's notion on religion before he embarked on his major poetic composition is traced by Robert M. Ryan in his monograph *Keats: The Religious Sense*. The household of his grandmother offered Keats basic understandings of the Bible and Christian doctrines, and developed his early attachment to religious imagery. In the academy of John Clarke at Enfield, he acquainted himself with protestant thinking, especially the Calvinist doctrines. Ryan notes that at Enfield Keats learned French from priest Abbé Béliard, who provided religious instructions that were "in a spirit of tolerance and open-mindedness" (35). During this period, Keats had not showed signs of hostility and rebelliousness against Christianity, and as Ryan deduces, Keats deepened his knowledge of the Bible to meet school's requirement of Catechism, familiarising himself with the rituals of baptism, sacrament, and the Eucharist. Ryan then identifies a certain moment between 1809 and 1810, in which Keats's scepticism toward organised religion began to sprout. Leigh Hunt's *Examiner* and Bishop Gilbert Burnet's *The History of My Own Time* formed the major impact on the young poet's religious thinking, as Ryan points out (41). Keats's scepticism developed

after he started his medical apprenticeship under the surgeon Thomas Hammond at Edmonton in 1811 and later professional medical career at Guy's Hospital in 1815. During these medical years, Keats was exposed to the newest trend of empiricist science that valued observation and experience above any "metaphysical subtlety and immaterial abstractions" that cannot be concretely perceived by human senses (Ryan 55). The lectures given by William Lawrence, Professor of Anatomy and Physiology at the Royal Academy, might stimulate Keats's critical reflection on his understanding of Christian religion, as Lawrence highlights the illogical and unscientific accounts of the Creation in the Old Testament: "Why should we embrace an hypothesis so full of contradictions?" (qtd. in Ryan 57) and declares that "Experience is our only safe guide, and inductions from numerous facts the only sure support of our reasoning" (qtd. in Ryan 63). Ryan observes that in such a medical milieu, "scientific empiricism went hand in hand with religious scepticism" (63) and proposes that Keats's later idea of "Negative Capability" might derive from his medical training experience, which endowed him "a willingness to accept uncertainty" and "patience with incomplete knowledge" (65). Ryan concludes that Keats's contact with and study in contemporary scientific and medical knowledge helped him cultivate "an attitude closely resembling what would call agnosticism" (67).

The subsequent influence Keats received in terms of religion, as Ryan discusses, is from the poet's participation in the literary circle centred on Leigh Hunt. Hunt's literary impact on Keats's early career is manifested in his 1817 collection *Poems*, with an opening poem dedicated to Hunt and constant references to Hunt's *Story of Rimini*. Apart from poetic appreciation and encouragement, Ryan acknowledges also the influence of Hunt's religious thinking on Keats. Hunt's religious view is somewhat conflicting, as Ryan notes, as he refuses concrete doctrines of organised religion such as Methodism and Catholicism, but is reluctant to renounce Christianity completely. He respects Jesus Christ, not as a semi-god who performs miracles and ordains laws, but as a great man of human passion, "represented to us through his affection for John and Mary Magdalen, and

through the amiable religion of the apostle” (Ryan 74). In his 1819 poetic collection *Foliage*, Hunt also expresses his espousal of “natural impulses” to counter the “authorized selfishness of religion and law,” as Nicholas Roe records in his article on Hunt in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. These thoughts propelled Hunt to seek a middle ground between downright atheism and orthodox Christianity, which he achieved in his much later 1853 book *The Religion of the Heart*. In its introduction, he states that “God has written his religion in the heart” (1) and “Doctrines revolting to the heart are not made to endure, however mixed up they may be with lessons the most divine” (2). In “the religion of heart,” as Hunt elaborates, God is “the Great Beneficence,” whose power and benevolence are manifested in the beauty and sublimity of his creation. And through their “hearts/feelings,” instead of “heads/reason,” human beings are able to perceive the presence and work of God. Hunt further proposes that “the holders of the Religion of the Heart” believe that the creation of God, the very material world human beings dwell in, is undergoing constant improvement, moving towards an ultimate perfect state: “his divine occupation is to work ends befitting his goodness, out of different forms of matter, and out of transient, qualified, and unmalignant evils;—probably to the endless multiplication of heavens” (4).

From the discussion above, we can see that Keats received various ideological inputs in terms of religion, from the basic ecclesiastical teachings in his childhood, the scientific empiricism in his years of studying and practicing medicine, to the “religion of the heart” in Hunt’s literary circle. All these elements contribute to the formation of Keats’s complicated and conflicting views of religion, especially Christianity. Keats’s ambivalent attitude toward religion can be observed as early as his 1816 sonnet “Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition,” in which his preference for Greco-Roman paganism over Christianity is demonstrated. In this poem, the contrast between Christianity and paganism is stressed by the former’s “melancholy round,” “gloominess, more dreadful cares,” and “sermon’s horrid sound,” and the latter’s “fireside joys, and Lydian airs” (*PJK* 88). Institutionalised Christianity imposes upon human beings an inert state of lifelessness, “A chill

as from a tomb” that is “dying like an outburnt lamp,” while its pagan counterpart provides artistic beauty, “that fresh flowers” and “many glories of immortal stamp” (88), which boosts life-affirmation and exuberant energy. Apart from his contrast between Christianity and paganism, Keats also differentiates Jesus Christ, whom he reveres as other Romantic poets do, from the Church that dominated the English people’s religious faith in his time. Jesus, for Keats, is “so great as man that though he transmitted no writing of his own to posterity, we have his Mind and his sayings and his greatness handed to us by others,” but his teachings are twisted and corrupted by “Men interested in the pious frauds of Religion” (*LK* 2.80). Here Keats echoes Hunt’s notion of Christ, and also echoes Blake, who declares that “no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments; Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse, not from rules” in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (*CPPB* 43). Furthermore, an eroticised version of Jesus is one of Keats’s designs in “The Eve of St. Agnes,” as I will discuss extensively later.

In the letter to George and Georgiana, in April 1819, Keats has an elaboration of his religion views of orthodox Christianity. Differing from Hunt’s belief in “the Great Beneficence” and his optimist aspiration to a better world-to-come, Keats reckons that “Man is originally ‘a poor forked creature’ subject to the same mischances as the beasts of the forest, destined to hardships and disquietude of some kind or other” (*LK* 2.101). For Keats, philosophical reasoning—“the persevering endeavours of a seldom appearing Socrates”—which is supposed to guide human beings to earthly happiness, is powerless in the face of death. Instead of appreciating God’s work as the representation of divine beauty and goodness, as Hunt’s “religion of the heart” assumes, Keats perceives more keenly the cruel indifference and immense malice of nature: “Look at the Poles and at the sands of Africa, Whirlpools and volcanoes—Let men exterminate them and I will say that they may arrive at earthly Happiness” (*LK* 2.101). As a rose that will inevitably be blighted by “a cold wind, a hot sun,” “no more can man be happy in spite, the worldly elements will prey upon his nature” (*LK* 2.101). Religion, especially

Christianity, ought to redeem human beings from the afflicting world, “a vale of tears,” but Keats dismisses it as “certain arbitrary interposition of God” and implies that under its sway men are “the misguided and superstitious” (*LK* 2.101-102). To salvage human beings from this predicament, Keats’s ideal replacement of Christian religion is a construal of this “vale of tears” as “The vale of Soul-making” that is “a grander system of salvation than the chryst^eain religion, or rather it is a system of Spirit-creation” (*LK* 2.102).

This Keatsian system consists of three materials: the *Intelligence*, the *human heart*, and the *World*. Intelligence is begot by the affliction that the World, or Elemental space, imposes upon the human heart, thus forming the Soul and “the sense of Identity”: “Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways!” (*LK* 2.102). By acknowledging, enduring, and learning from the cruelty, ugliness, and caprice of God’s creation, instead of blindly identifying only the agreeable aspects of the world and yearning for an improved world-to-come, human beings can thus establish their identity and subjectivity. Such is an alternative procedure espoused by Keats in lieu of Christian religion, “a system of Salvation which does not affront our reason and humanity” (*LK* 2.103). In this letter, as Daniel P. Watkins discerns, Keats shows that “identity is not pre-given but rather emerges from situations of conflict and difficulty,” and presents “a view of identity as the happy influence of painful circumstantial pressures in forming a spiritually meaningful essence: identity becomes synonymous with salvation. . . a modified version of the Christian idealism to which Keats objects” (Watkins 96). In this letter, Keats does recognise a Jehovah-like Supreme Being who creates the world, but he refuses to believe that God’s intention is absolutely good, concerning the negativities of human life: fear, worry, sorrow, malice, pain, and death. Keats perceives “how man was formed by circumstances” and equalling “circumstances” with “touchstones of his heart,” “proofings of his heart,” “fortifiers or alterers of his nature,” and finally, “soul” and “intelligence” (*LK* 2.103). These elements are “the medium of the Heart,” through which human beings establish and

possess “the sense of Identity” (LK 2.102). Therefore, he regards human salvation as a personal matter, a process of individual struggle with these earthly plights, to secure a life of self-sufficiency and intelligence, which has nothing to do with God and any religious agencies. Thus, Watkins remarks correctly that the letter “helps to elucidate Keats’s strong drive to situate himself as a stable identity in a turbulent world” (97). Keats expresses his aspiration to a stable social identity, whose establishment and fortification are based on an individual’s perception of and response to the material world, in the absence of God and Christian religion. At the end of this discussion of “Soul-making,” Keats ponders over “how is the heart to become this Medium but in a world of Circumstance?” and he leaves an incomplete answer before a sudden change of topic: “There now I think what with Poetry and Theology you may thank your Stars that my pen is not very long winded” (LK 2.104). The position of poetry in this process of “Soul-making” and possessing “the sense of Identity” is an issue that Keats seems to intend to say more about. But it is abruptly discontinued by the sentence “Yesterday I received two Letters from your Mother and Henry which I shall send by young Birkbeck with this—” (LK 2.104).

This issue reminds us of his previous letter written to Woodhouse on 27 October 1818, in which Keats highlights the phenomenon of self-annihilation by asserting that “As to the poetical Character itself . . . it is not itself—it has no self” and “A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity” (LK 1.386-387). I have discussed this Keatsian paradox in the preceding section: Keats is the most *poetical* because he is the most *unpoetical*. If we compare the 1818 Woodhouse letter with the 1819 “Soul-making” letter, a contradiction in Keats’s thinking emerges. In the latter, Keats renounces Christianity from worldly experience and replaces it with the system of “Soul-making” to establish and stabilise a social identity. However, artistic imagination and poetic creation, as he asserts in the former, annihilate his individual character and identity. In terms of religion and artistic creation, what exact role does poetry play in human experience for Keats, whose social identity is both secured and destroyed by being a poet? The Keatsian

paradox seems to linger in this conflicting issue about establishing identity in Keats's understanding of religious experience and poetic creation.

Christian religion and its earthly representative institutions, for Keats, spread misguidance and superstition and prevent human beings from establishing their own identities. And under the influences of empiricist philosophies and the newest scientific knowledge of his time, as well as “the religion of the heart,” from key figures such as Voltaire, Jeremy Bentham, William Lawrence, Leigh Hunt, and William Hazlitt, Keats formulates a path to self-sufficiency and self-reliance without seeking God's supposed benign interference. Rejecting the blindness to worldly negativities and unthoughtful optimism for a promised better future, this path is dependent on human experience in perceiving the material world and learning from the inevitable sorrow and pain it imposes on human beings. However, as a poet, Keats aims to represent such negative phenomenon in life—“the agonies, the strife / Of human hearts”—with poetic imagination. Such is a process of self-annihilation that endangers the social identity Keats has established by distancing himself from God and Christianity, because an effectual poetical representation of “the agonies and strife” and “a fierce dispute / Betwix damnation and impassioned clay” necessitates the decentralisation of individuality, the renouncement of subjectivity.

On the level of reality, Keats's social identity as a poet is assaulted by harsh criticism for writing poetry of “effeminacy” and “masturbation,” which decentralises and degrades cultural masculinity in the nineteenth century. To some extent, not only his social identity is threatened in this way, but also his physical existence is destroyed for writing poetry, if we believe Shelley's accusation of the *Quarterly Review*, whose “savage criticism” on Keats “produced the most violent effect on his susceptible mind; the agitation thus originated ended in the rupture of a blood-vessel in the lungs; a rapid consumption ensued” (*MW* 529).⁸⁹ For Keats, poetic creation, on several

⁸⁹ Byron expresses his pity, which is mixed with lingering sleight, on Keats's death and its alleged cause of harsh criticism both in his letter to John Murray—“He who would die of an article in a review—would probably have died of something else equally trivial” (Byron and Moore 163)—and in Canto 11 of *Don Juan*: “John Keats, who was kill'd off by one critique . . . 'Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle, / Should let itself be snuff'd out by

levels, signifies the poet's self-destruction of his social identity and even physical well-being, a notion that I have discussed through my reading of "Isabella." Through an analysis of "The Eve of St. Agnes," I would take my argument further by proposing that in this poem, poetic creation is a return to the lost sacredness, a religious experience that replaces God with eroticism. Keats's idea of religious sacredness in "The Eve of St. Agnes" rebels against his own formulations of "forming the *Soul or Intelligence destined to possess the sense of Identity*" (LK 2.102). Keats's latent equalisation of the sacred and the erotic runs counter to his own ideas of "a sense of Identity" and "Sould-making," which are achieved through the anti-Christian "Intelligence" of empiricism offered by his medical education and "the religion of the heart" from the Leigh Hunt circle. This return to sacredness is not a reconversion to orthodox Christianity, undoubtedly, but a similar phenomenon we observe in Blake's works, which is the re-inclusion of heterogeneous sexual desires into religious experiences, both Christian and pagan.

In "The Eve of St. Agnes," Keatsian sacredness epitomises the double-layered meaning of the very word "sacred," which is derived from the Latin word *sacer*, as Mary Douglas points out, meaning both "desecration and consecration" (10). That is, as Douglas puts it, "Holiness and unholiness after all need not always be absolute opposites" (10); sacredness does not necessarily entail or result from purity, continuity, and completeness, but more significantly, it pertains to impurity, disruption, abjectness, and obscenity, elements that decentralise self, break identity, and annihilate subjectivity. In the following discussion, I will examine Keats's employment of religious images and motifs, especially the Beadsman, Mary Magdalene and the ritual of St. Agnes itself, by exploring his possible sources of inspiration of this saint and her ritual. I will then analyse the interaction between Madeline and Porphyro. My analysis will demonstrate how Keatsian sacredness in this poem is achieved through the eroticisation of Christianity, the re-inclusion of the violent, disrupted, and obscene aspects of humanity into religious experiences.

an article" (*Poetical Works* 716).

“The Eve of St. Agnes” begins with the perspective of the Beadsman, who represents the orthodox Christianity, to survey the material world, the “world of Circumstances” in Keats’s own words. The material world is in the “bitter chill” of St. Agnes’s Eve, the 21st of January,⁹⁰ in which all living beings are rendered inert and mute, lifeless and senseless, including the owl, the hare, the flock, and the Beadsman himself, whose fingers are numb. With this opening, Keats presents the struggle of religious people, who seek comfort from an exterior and abstract divine power to cope with the bleak reality. In vain is this struggle, as Keats indicates with a tone of indeterminacy that the Beadsman’s “frosted breath, / Like pious incense from a censer old, / Seem’d taking flight for heaven, without a death, / Past the sweet Virgin’s picture, while his prayer he saith” (1.6-9).

The image of ascending incense is worth noticing. In his analysis of the Bible in *Words with Power*, Northrop Frye detects a “up and down vertical pattern,” which he terms *axis mundi* (151). The pattern consists of two opposite movements of human beings in the material world, a vertically middle sphere: the ascent and the descent. The former signifies an aspiration to and reunion with God and the once lost paradise, while the latter a further alienation from God and an approximation to eternal death, or Hell. While *axis mundi* is a “vertical dimension of cosmos” that represents space, time is the horizontal dimension. The two cross each other at the very point of true salvation, where spatial and temporal limits are conquered: “the point where the axis mundi crosses time, the moment of incarnation, is we saw ‘the still point of the turning world,’ and the centre of axis” (176). The image of the Beadsman’s incense-like “frosted breath” that floats upward to heaven is an image of “ascent” in the pattern of *axis mundi* in the Christian context, according to Frye’s formulation. But for Keats, such an aspiration is ineffectual and futile, as the very word “Seem’d” suggests a sense of fictional appearance, a blindly optimist semblance, and an illusion that religion can provide an existence “without a death.” The past tense of “Seem’d” contradicts to the present tense of “his prayer he saith” in the next line. That

⁹⁰ See Alban Butler’s 1800 work *Lives of the Saints*, p. 20.

is, in the Beadsman's case, the vertical line of *axis mundi* fails to cross the horizontal line of time, thus denying him any chance of true salvation.⁹¹

Michael Ragussis also considers the Beadsman a victim of time's power. He accentuates Keats's "fluctuation between past tense and present tense throughout the poem" that generates a sense of oscillation between "a fiction of long ago . . . and a present reality" (382). The past tense of "Seem'd" not only obscures the boundary between the fictional and the real, but also signals the invalidity and inability of the Christian faith to bring forth salvation. The present tense of the Beadsman's actual actions—"His prayer he saith" repeated in the first line of Stanza 2, and "takes his lamp, and riseth from his knees, / And back returneth" (2.1-3)—represents a disparity between religious performances in reality and spiritual comfort that religious people aim to achieve through these practices; the former does not lead to the latter. In Stanza 2, the Beadsman is "meagre, barefoot, wan" and of "weak spirit," walking through the chapel aisle, where "The sculpture'd dead . . . / Emprison'd in black, purgatorial rails" already foreshadows his doom, as well as the doom of other religious people: the "Knights, ladies," who pray "in dumb orat'ries" (2.12, 15-17) and Angela, who dies a gruesome death at the end of the poem.

In Stanza 3, Keats presents a malignant consequence of religious practice. The Beadsman is tempted by material and sensual enjoyments, when "Music's golden tongue / Flatter'd to tears this aged man and poor" (3.20-21). The narrator coldly declares his detachment from them: "already had his deathbell rung; / The joys of all his life were said and sung: / His was harsh penance on St. Agnes' Eve" (3.23-24). The Beadsman then turns away to his penance, which is originally followed by a deleted stanza that depicts an alluring picture of sensual pleasures:

But there are ears may not hear sweet melodies,
And there are eyes to brighten festivals,

⁹¹ The ascending image of incense also appears in Keats's dedication poem to Leigh Hunt in his 1817 collection. In this poem, Keats shows a blissful state of Greco-Roman paganism in the past, where *axis mundi* and time do cross each other: "wreathed *incense* do we see upborne / Into the east, to meet the smiling *day*" (emphasis added, *PJK* 93). Ironically, the moment of salvation is denied in the Beadsman's Christian practice, but granted in a pagan ceremony of long-lost past.

And there are feet for nimble minstrelsies,
And many a lip that for the red wine calls.—
Follow, then follow to the illumined halls,
Follow me youth—and leave the Eremite—
Give him a tear—then trophied banneral,
And many a brilliant tasseling of light,
Shall droop from arched ways this high Baronial night. (*PJK* 300)

In this discarded stanza, Keats casts doubt on religious asceticism, which is practiced in exchange for spiritual peace in this life and eternal happiness in the afterlife. The better afterlife has been indicated as false and illusory in the past-tense “Seem’d” in Stanza 1, and the spiritual peace in this life is now proven futile and invalid, as the Beadsman obtains no internal peace by practicing his religious penance. He is still tormented by the temptation of material luxuries and sensual pleasures, as Robert Kern also observes that his “ability to alter or ignore reality is shown to be an inability, a failure of nerve, a turning away from possibilities and feelings to which he is vulnerable but which he has long repressed” (182). As Frye further elaborates in *Words with Power*, a successful ascent marks the return to the prelapsarian paradise, which is “associated with sunshine, youth and fertility and form[s] a *locus amoenus* or pleasant place where it is always spring and autumn at once,” a primary state exemplified by the Garden of Adonis in Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, a symbolic image of Mother Nature’s womb that represents sexual vitality (180). Frye’s formulation of *axis mundi* and time accentuates the original sexual undercurrents in the biblical context, which is later toned down and excluded by institutionalised Christianity. Keats observes the deprivation of sexual vitality in the contemporary Church, as his 1816 sonnet “Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition” demonstrates. In this poem, institutionalised Christianity puts human beings in an inert state of lifelessness: “The church bells toll a melancholy round” with “Some other gloominess, more dreadful cares” and “the sermon’s horrid sound” (1-4 *PJK* 88). What remains in Christianity is “A chill as from a tomb” that is “dying like an outburnt lamp” (10-11), and its lost sexual vitality can only be found in paganism—the “fireside joys, and Lydian air,” “fresh flowers,” and “many glories of immortal stamp” (7, 13-14)—that promotes exuberant energy of

sexuality. The Beadsman's penance and asceticism thus represent the sterile status of contemporary Christians, who are denied a successful ascent and alienated from the primary paradise. Therefore, Keats's characterisation of the Beadsman suggests that it is impossible to utterly renounce earthly desires by means of asceticism. On the contrary, the true meaning of religious sacredness in Christianity lies in the reincorporation of erotic desire, as the ritual of St. Agnes and the interaction between Madeline and Porphyro will attest to in the poem.

After criticising the Christian tradition of sacredness, Keats initiates his presentation of an alternative sacredness of eroticism, which, instead of forsaking material and sensual experiences, reincorporates sexual desire into its operation. And such an operation of sacredness relies upon the figure of St. Agnes and the ritual this Catholic saint represents. Considering Keats's source materials in composing this poem, critics often merely focus on literary influences such as Spenser, Shakespeare, Anne Radcliff, Walter Scott, and Coleridge (*KPP* 445). Few of them consider why Keats chooses St. Agnes's Eve as the major motif in the poem, from what source he acquaints himself with St. Agnes's story, and what influence these source materials might have on his composition of the poem. Dealing with these questions, I would propose that in terms of St. Agnes's Eve, Keats not only draws ideas from John Brand's *Observations on Popular Antiquities* and Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*,⁹² but also St. Agnes's personal biography, such as the one written by L. Sherling in 1677. The story of St. Agnes itself, though appearing as a typical hagiographical account, as recorded in Sherling's *The Life of the Blessed St. Agnes: Virgin and Martyr in Prose and Verse*, in fact demonstrates an erotic struggle of desire and jealousy, in which Agnes is caught between two male suitors, namely Jesus

⁹² In his letter to Benjamin Bailey, Keats mentions that he has written two poems in the past two months, and one of them is "call'd St Agnes' Eve on a popular superstition" (*LK* 2.139). In terms of Keats's sources, Jeffrey N. Cox notes that Keats might have read about the superstition from Brand's 1777 book *Observations on Popular Antiquities*, which was reprinted in 1813 (*KPP* 445). And in Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, which Keats read avidly, the ritual is also mentioned: "or by fasting on St. Agnes' Eve or Night, to know who shall be their first husband" (181).

Christ and a Roman young man. The eroticised devotion to God, as I will show, might inspire Keats's poetic designs of Madeline's ritual and Porphyro's action. Under the cover of a Christian saint, Keats reclaims the lost sacredness in orthodox Christianity represented by the Beadsman, and presents Keats's idea of sacredness that synthesises religious and sexual experiences.

In the two sources acknowledged by critics, namely Brand's and Burton's works, both authors describe the ritual itself, but give no account of St. Agnes's life and how her martyrdom is related to this specific superstition. Keats's choice of St. Agnes's Eve as an agent of his poem about erotic love is not only because of its element of dreaming future husband, but also because he is aware of the story of St. Agnes herself. As mentioned above, a possible source of St. Agnes's life is L. Sherling's *The Life of the Blessed St. Agnes: Virgin and Martyr in Prose and Verse* published in 1677. To support my argument, I would briefly summarise Sherling's work, and highlight the possible factors in it that might inspire Keats's poetic designs in "The Eve of St. Agnes."

The Life of the Blessed St. Agnes is a detailed and vivid narrative that relates the saint's life, struggle, and death. According to Sherling, St. Agnes was born in a noble family in late third-century Rome, at a time when Christianity was forbidden and oppressed in the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, in her youth, Agnes "had dedicated her Virginity to her sweet Redeemer, and made a formal Vow of perpetual Chastitie" (4) and "fix'd thy thoughts on Heaven, and wast engag'd in the contemplation of the Holy Jesus" (5). The major event happened when Agnes was thirteen; a young man, who is the son of the Prefect Symbrionius, the Governor of the city, attempted to woo her: "He saw her, he admir'd her, he lov'd her, all in an instant: That crowd of Beauties that Heaven had endow'd her with" (6). Agnes refused her suitor adamantly, indicating that her heart was already taken by someone else: "my Soul is prepossess'd, and being engaged elsewhere cannot comply with your desires" (12). The person Agnes spoke about, is Jesus Christ. However, the suitor believed that he had a strong rival

in contesting for Agnes's love and was tortured by jealousy and fury. He was determined to find Agnes's lover and carry out his vengeance, but as there was no such a man, his search was fruitless. After his efforts failed, the young man believed that Agnes cheated him into believing the existence of such a rival, and attempted a second pursuit. Agnes again refused him and assured him that "thou hast a Rival; Know I Love him, and prefer him to all the World; and when thou know'st this, if thou wilt still pursue a fruitless passion, never expect any thing from me but scorn and contempt" (25). The suitor retreated again in despair and anger, accusing Agnes of unfeeling cruelty. His health deteriorated with his mental distress. The Governor Symbronius discerned his son's pining away, and persuaded the latter to confide the cause of such misery. Symbronius then met with Agnes's father, who was fully aware of his daughter's religious devotion, and requested him to command Agnes to accept the proposal and thus tie the two noble families with marriage. Agnes's father pretended to agree with Symbronius's proposition, as he actually supported his daughter's decision. After the final failed attempt to win Agnes for his son, Symbronius in frustration and fury accidentally found out Agnes's secret identity as a Christian, and arrested her with accusation of blasphemy. During the trial, Agnes refused Symbronius's offer of pardon on the conditions of renouncing her Christian faith and marrying his son, which eventually led to her martyrdom, after she was stripped naked and dragged to a brothel as a mocking punishment of her virginity preserved for Jesus Christ.

Although there is no direct evident showing Keats did read this seventeenth-century document, the uniqueness of St. Agnes's story associated with Keats's poem, especially in Sherling's narrative, lies in the following three elements. First, Agnes's religious devotion to Jesus is tinged with sexual undertones. Even when Sherling is writing about her spiritual piety, he accentuates Agnes's physical beauty by comparing her "Beauties, Charms, and Graces" to "all our worldly pleasures" and "earthly enjoyments" (4). Such a presentation allures readers to imagine what exceptional sexual attraction Agnes possesses to surpass other material and bodily enjoyments.

Juxtaposed with Agnes's prayer, in which she devotes her pure body of virginity to Jesus, such an erotic imagination is enhanced with a sense of sacred unattainability of sexual fulfilment, as well as a potential fantasy of transgressing this sacred prohibition. Second, Sherling's description of the suitor's depression after his second failed attempt echoes Burton's earlier discourse of melancholy, which Keats is very familiar with. The young man suffered psychologically and physically: "In so miserable a distraction as his Soul then was, his Body could not chuse but partake of the common miseries. Their was as great Revolutions in his humours as in his thoughts, and that profound Melancholie that had seis'd his Soul, gave but too dismal Effects not to be discovered" (29). Keats reprised such physical and mental deterioration in the pathological poetics in "Isabella," as I have analysed in the previous section. Third, Agnes's story bears a resemblance to *Romeo and Juliet*, and even "The Eve of St. Agnes" itself. There is also the conflict between patriarchal oppression and the heroine's love choice. Resonating with Shakespeare's and Keats's stories, St. Agnes faces coercion and threat, which compel her to forsake her true lover, though a spiritual one, and to love and marry another man she does not love. These three elements—the eroticisation of religious devotion, the pathological symptoms of erotic love, and the romance-like pattern of Agnes's life and martyrdom—are all recapitulated in Keats's poem, aptly explicating his choice of this particular saint as the central motif of "The Eve of St. Agnes."

In Stanza 5, after showing the Beadsman's futile asceticism, Keats introduces Madeline with an exhibition of material luxuries—"At length burst in the argent revelry, / With plume, tiara, and all rich array"—that epitomises the "triumphs gay / Of old romance" (5.37-41). He then excludes his heroine from this "old romance" by turning the reader away from the above pompousness: "There let us wish away, / And turn, sole-thoughted, to one Lady there" (5.42). In her first appearance, Madeline's pensive image, "Whose heart had brooded, all that wintry day, / On love" (5.43-44), is a sharp contrast to the revelling bustle in the previous lines, indicating her spiritual love superior to the material and sensual pleasures of other people in the

hall. But this spiritual superiority over materiality and corporeality is merely a semblance that Keats will subvert in the later parts of the poem. Keats also invites the reader to consider “wing’d St. Agnes’ saintly care,” indicating St. Agnes’s role as the patron saint of various female identities: girls, virgins, betrothed women, and rape victims (Trüeb 98). By implying Agnes’s patronage of these female identities, Keats gives the character of Madeline a potential sense of ambiguity. Madeline is a girl and a virgin at this point, and she can be a betrothed woman to Porphyro, as scholars who hold idealist interpretations argue. She can also be a rape victim of Porphyro, a sceptical reading insisted by critics such as Stillinger. That is, prior to Porphyro’s actions, Keats already complicates Madeline’s identity with the hidden meanings of the figure of St. Agnes.

In Stanza 6, Keats presents his version of the ritual of St. Agnes’s Eve:

As, supperless to bed they must retire,
And couch supine their beauties, lily white;
Nor look behind, nor sideways, but require
Of heaven with upward eyes for all that they desire. (6.51-54)

Compared with Brand’s and Burton’s documents, Keats’s version retains the common element of fasting in both sources, excluding the “Groaning Cheese” under pillow in the former. In addition, Keats includes a specific practice that is unseen in both Brand’s and Burton’s documents: nakedness. Both fasting and nakedness are significant for Keats’s reconstruction of the ritual, as he retains the former and includes the latter. Burton discusses fasting in the part of “Religious Melancholy” in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, rejecting the practice in pagan religions of “Turks, Chinese, Gentiles, Abyssinians, Greeks, Latins” (342). But he then argues that “Not that fasting is a thing to be discommended” and describes the advantages of fasting in the Christian context. In his own copy of the *Anatomy*, it is on the margin of this passage about fasting that Keats writes his one-word comment “good”—“for it is an excellent means to keep the body in subjection, a preparative to devotion, the physic of the soul, by which chaste thoughts are engendered, true zeal, a divine spirit, whence wholesome counsels do proceed, concupiscence is restrained, vicious and predominant lusts and humours are

expelled" (342).⁹³ We cannot be certain about to what extent does Keats's "good" signify his agreement with Burton's discourse. Considering Keats's general hostility to Christianity and affinity to Greco-Roman mythology, as postulated in the sonnet "Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition" discussed previously, I suggest that what Keats deems "good" is not Burton's differentiation between pagan fasting and Christian fasting (as the line marking Keats's "good" only includes the passage quoted above).⁹⁴ For Keats, what is significant is Burton's idea that the practice of fasting, the prohibition of one bodily desire, opens a door to another form of desire. For Burton, this latter form of desire is religious devotion, "chaste thoughts," "true zeal," and "divine spirit," but for Keats, being "supperless" enables Madeline to "have visions of delight . . . Upon the honey'd middle of the night" (6.47-49), to aspire to sexual fulfilment. In this sense, Keats is potentially equalising sacred experience with erotic experience. Also, Keats takes heed of Burton's concept that fasting positions "the body in subjection," as he recognises that both sacred and erotic experiences require the subject to relieve his/her individuality and subjectivity, forsaking the control of his/her own body. Keats's design of Madeline's nakedness also reflects this concept of "the body in subjection." Being naked in St. Agnes's ritual evokes Agnes's famous humiliating punishment before her martyrdom. As Sherling's hagiography records, Symbrionius "commanded her to be stript of all her Cloths, and then to be led to be Naked to the common *Bordelli*, and there to be exposed to the lust of all comers" (85). This episode explains why St.

⁹³ The image of page 510 of Keats's own copy of the *Anatomy*, which shows his one-word comment "good," is reproduced in Janice Sinson's *John Keats and The Anatomy of Melancholy*, p.1.

⁹⁴ In addition, in the dedication poem to Leigh Hunt "Glory and loveliness have passed away" of his 1817 collection, Keats again shows nostalgic sentiments for the classical "Glory and loveliness" of "crowd of nymphs" and "The shrine of Flora" (PJK 93). His preference for Greco-Roman mythology can also be reflected in several contemporary criticisms of his poetry. For example, as already referred to in the previous section, Lockhart's 1818 article "On the Cockney School of Poetry" in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* attacks Keats's "profane and vulgarised" adaptation of Greek mythology (530). Also, it is reflected by Wordsworth's famous remark: "a Very pretty piece of Paganism" (Roe 196). Moreover, as Anthony John Harding's study shows, Keats might have followed the contemporary trend of interest in the ancient classical world and its religion, promoted by the new archaeological discoveries and "late-Enlightenment speculation about the origins of religious belief in the response of early human societies to the natural world" (137).

Agnes has become the patron saint of rape victims. Agnes's humiliation of being naked and "exposed to the lust" of men prefigures Madeline's naked subjection to Porphyro's lustful gaze and reinforces the undertone of voyeurism and rape. Aware of his source materials, Keats draws the element of fasting from Brand and Burton, and includes the element of nakedness that is possibly extracted from Agnes's own story recorded in Sherling's document. By combining fasting and nakedness, Keats's unique design of St. Agnes's ritual delineates his idea of sacredness as an experience of annihilating individuality and forsaking the control of the body. For Keats, "the body in subjection" in St. Agnes's ritual is the very condition of accessing the state of sacredness, corresponding to the phenomenon of "obscene" self-annihilation in the Romantic erotic subject I have observed and discussed in Blake's and Shelley's works.

In the earlier version of the poem in Richard Woodhouse's transcription, there is a deleted stanza between Stanza 6 and Stanza 7, in which Keats gives a further depiction of Madeline's vision, which is "the sweetest of the year" (7.63). In the dream of the maiden who performs the ritual, her future husband not only appears, but also

Offering, as sacrifice—all in the dream—
 Delicious food, even to her lips brought near,
 Viands, and wine, and fruit, and sugar'd cream,
 To touch her palate with the fine extreme
 Of relish: then soft music heard, and then
 More pleasures follow'd in a dizzy stream
 Palpable almost: then to wake again
 Warm in the virgin morn, no weeping Magdalen. (PJK 301)

According to Stillinger's study, Keats wrote the first draft of "The Eve of St. Agnes" in January 1819, and revised the poem and produced its fair copy in early September ("The Text of 'The Eve of St. Agnes'" 208). This stanza was inserted between Stanza 6 and Stanza 7, which, along with other modifications, both Woodhouse and John Taylor strongly disagreed. As referred to in the beginning of this section, in his letter to Taylor written on 19 September, Woodhouse mentioned that Keats "has made trifling alterations, inserted an additional stanza early in the poem to make the *legend* more intelligible . . . he retains the name of Porphyro—has altered the last 3 lines

to leave on the reader a sense of pettish disgust, by bringing Old Angela in (only) dead stiff & ugly” (LK 2.162-163). Woodhouse even felt that Keats took pleasure in his objections, “trying his hand at an attempt to play with his reader, & fling him off at last” (LK 2.163). Taylor responded to Woodhouse on 25 September, agreeing the latter’s negative view of Keats’s revisions: “I cannot but confess to you that it excites in me the Strongest Sentiments of Disapprobation” (LK 2.183). In the final version published in the 1820 *Lamia* collection, Keats complied with Woodhouse’s and Taylor’s suggestions and removed the added stanza between Stanza 6 and Stanza 7. The sexual connotations in this deleted stanza render the poem “unfit for ladies” (LK 2.163) and “unfit for publications” (LK 2.183), in both Woodhouse’s and Taylor’s words, thus resulting its deletion from the final version in the *Lamia* collection. Stillinger argues for the restoration of this deleted stanza, because it supports his sceptical reading of Madeline as a “hoodwinked” young woman in dream and a rape victim of Porphyro in reality. Keats’s additional lines, as he contends, “heighten the irony of Madeline’s self-deception and clarify Keats’s condemnation of ‘dreaming’” and “Madeline’s engrossment in superstitious ritual to the point of losing touch with reality” (“The Text” 211). I also propose a reconsideration of this discarded stanza, because it provides an example of Keats’s erotic appropriation of a Christian image, namely Mary Magdalene, and help us better understand his unique idea of religious sacredness, which entails the reincorporation of sexual desire.

In this stanza, the vision of Madeline features material and sensual enjoyments; it is a ritual of “sacrifice” but also a feast of “Delicious food . . . / Viands, and wine, and fruit, and sugar’d cream” and “soft music” (PJK 301). All these material luxuries are brought to Madeline in a highly erotic manner by the envisioned husband, who originally represents Jesus Christ as a spiritual lover in Agnes’s hagiography. Keats interweaves the spiritual with the corporeal, emphasising Madeline’s lips and palate, “with the fine extreme / Of relish” and even suggests that “More pleasures follow’d in a dizzy stream / Palpable almost” (301). Titillating Madeline’s senses of tasting and hearing, Keats invites the reader to imagine another sense that is “Palpable almost,”

the bodily sense of erotic touching that can bring forth “More pleasures” and make Madeline “wake again / Warm in the virgin morn, no weeping Magdalen” (301). The “no weeping Magdalen” in this dropped stanza rarely draws critical attention; it seems a strange reference unrelated to the plot, like the line in Stanza 19 that has Porphyro oddly parallel the wizard Merlin in the Arthurian tales. Nevertheless, the “no weeping Magdalen” in this deleted stanza can be interpreted from two perspectives: the cultural image of reformed prostitute and the biblical figure of Jesus’s follower.

Mary Magdalene has been traditionally conflated with Mary of Bethany and the unnamed sinful woman in the Gospel of Luke since the Middle Age, a widespread but inaccurate identification that, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests, leads to the later usage of the noun “Magdalene” to mean a prostitute or a reformed prostitute (“Magdalene, n1”). This is also reflected by the naming of the famous asylum for fallen women founded in London in 1758 as the “Magdalen Hospital,” which is “a charitable foundation established to provide a reformatory refuge for distressed women who were either prostitutes or who had no recourse except prostitution” (Ellis and Lewis 11-12). As many historians have noted, there is a significant change of the cultural image of prostitutes in the eighteenth century. Before mid-eighteenth century, prostitutes were the embodiment of insatiable sexual desire of women, who actively sought customers for excessive pleasure. As Sophie Carter points out, “the archetypal prostitute was as greedy, opportunistic and utterly devoid of moral conscience as she was guileful and alluring” and “represented an incontrovertible transgression not only of the moral code but, more specifically, of the very order of femininity itself” (21). However, towards the end of the eighteenth century, prostitutes began to be viewed in the context of labour and marketplace. Instead of the siren-like image of lustfulness, they were seen as workers and represented “the disturbing intersection of the economic and the personal” (Rosenthal 4), thus generating the cultural sympathy for the women who were “faced with a choice between remunerated sexual activity and abject poverty” (7). The establishment of the Magdalen Hospital certainly reflected this new image of

prostitutes. As Mary Peace observes, the institute shaped the social view that “[f]rom vilified agent of moral and social contamination, the prostitute had become a virtuous and recuperable victim of circumstance” (141). Read from the above perspective, Keats’s adoption of the phrase “no weeping Magdalen” and the parallel between this image and Madeline seem to suggest that the castle where Madeline resides is the very “circumstance” that will force her into sexual activities against her will, the similar distress St. Agnes had undergone. That the “Baron” who rules the castle might marry Madeline to one of his “warrior-guests” as a commodity in exchange for political or financial gains echoes the plan of Isabella’s brothers to “coax her by degrees / To some high noble and his olive-trees” (21.167-168). Only through the ritual of St. Agnes, in which “her future lord would there appear,” can Madeline be liberated from the marketplace of political marriage, which is analogous to the loveless sex in prostitution, and become “no weeping Magdalen,” reformed and recuperated by her union with Porphyro. To some extent, this interpretation based on the cultural image of reformed prostitute conforms to the idealist readings led by Wasserman. Apart from this interpretation, I will then analyse the “no weeping Magdalen” from the second perspective: the biblical figure of Mary Magdalene as Jesus’s follower. This reading sheds light on how Keats subtly synthesises sexual experience and sacredness by eroticising Christian figures.

Mary Magdalene appears in several episodes of the New Testament, including Jesus’s exorcism on her to expel the seven demons, her presence at the crucifixion and Jesus’s empty tomb, and her witness of the resurrection. The “weeping Magdalen” appears in the Gospel of John, when she and other disciples cannot find Jesus’s body in the tomb: “But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping” (20: 11).⁹⁵ And when asked by the two angels about the reason for her weeping, Mary replies: “Because they have taken away my LORD, and I know not where they have laid him” (20: 15). Mary Magdalene is weeping because she loses sight of the corporeal

⁹⁵ All the biblical quotations are from *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha* edited by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett.

existence of Jesus, and also because at that moment she is ignorant of the spiritual return of her Lord: "For as yet they knew not the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead" (20: 9). In Madeline's case, after her dream of St. Agnes's Eve, which is imbued with bodily pleasures, Madeline is no longer a "weeping Magdalen" because she has already embraced the corporeal existence of her envisioned husband, based on Agnes's lover as Jesus Christ, within a spiritual sphere of religious vision. In the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalen ceases weeping after she witnesses Jesus's resurrection, another crucial image of ascent in Frye's formulation: "I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God" (20: 17). In this deleted stanza of "The Eve of St. Agnes," Madeline is "no weeping Magdalen" after the sexual interaction with her future love, a Jesus-figure who gratifies her with material and bodily pleasures, thus integrating the concept of resurrection and sexual love. In *Words with Power*, Frye examines the male-female imagery in the New Testament, noting that "the imagery of bridegroom and bride" is associated with "the second coming and the Apocalypse" (203). The conjugal union, which is termed *agape* and presented with highly erotic poetics in The Song of Songs, is sublimated and elevated to Jesus's love for human beings and the Church in the New Testament. Such a phenomenon, as Frye further postulates, indicates "a spectrum extending from complete sublimation, where all sexual imagery 'means' or points away from sex to religious experience, to a more directly erotic form where sexual experience is the central focus" (205). Paralleling Madeline with Mary Magdalene in the sensual vision of the hour of St. Agnes, who has Jesus as her spiritual lover, Keats subtly reverses the process of sublimation in Frye's formulation by restoring Jesus's role as a bridegroom to the sexual end of the spectrum. That is, with the reference to Mary Magdalene in this vision of somatic and material pleasures, Keats erotises the Christian concepts of resurrection and the second coming, pointing to a state of divine intimacy, which is accessed via sexual fulfilment brought forth by Jesus Christ not only as a spiritual leader, but also as a sexual lover. The true essence of religious rituals, even in the Christian context, is not about

temperance or asceticism, but is about violent consumption of material and bodily desires. Keats's design of "no weeping Magdalen" activates the reader's imagination of Jesus as a sexual being, thus uniting the religious and the erotic. Revisiting this deleted stanza, we see that it not only supports Stillinger's sceptical reading. More crucially, it exemplifies Keats's unique construal of religious sacredness, a heterogeneous phenomenon of eroticism and poetic imagination that sexually revises and eroticises Christian images and motifs.

Harbouring this belief in St. Agnes's ritual for sexual fulfilment, Madeline is "Full of whim" and "thoughtful" (7.55). Keats's deliberate oxymoronic juxtaposition of "whim" and "thoughtful" blurs the boundary between fantasy and reason, generating a sense of ambiguity in both erotic and religious experiences. In Stanza 7, Keats re-presents a picture of St. Agnes's story, by portraying Madeline's disregard of "many a sweeping train" and "many a tiptoe, amorous cavalier" (7.58, 60) that echoes Agnes's rejection of Symbrionius's son. Madeline's apparent detachment from earthly sounds and colours is infused with a trancelike and sleepwalking air. As she wonders through other guests, she "scarcely heard," "heeded not at all," "saw not," and "her heart was elsewhere" (7.57-62). From Stanza 7 to Stanza 8, Madeline constantly "sigh'd" and "sighs," and Keats's shift from past tense to present tense not only serves the rhyme scheme, but also suggests her state of mind, whose approximation to "The hallow'd hour"—erotic and sacred experiences—renders her unaware of the confinements of time and space. When this "hallow'd hour was near at hand," Madeline sighs, "Anxious her lips, her breathing quick and short" (8.65-66). The proximity between the erotic undertone of her bodily reactions and her awareness of the hallowed hour's coming corresponds to Madeline being full of "whim" and "thoughtful" at the same time, and again stresses Keatsian sacredness of eroticism.

The line "Hoodwink'd with faery fancy" in Stanza 8 has become well-known in Keats studies after Stillinger takes the word "Hoodwink" into the title of his famous essay "The Hoodwinking of Madeline: Scepticism in 'The Eve of St. Agnes'" in 1961. Stillinger equalises "hoodwinking" with deception and

connects it to Porphyro's "stratagem" in Stanza 16, an opportunistic "ruse, an artifice, a trick for deceiving" that enables him to commit his "peeping Tomism" and rape of Madeline: "she is a maiden innocent and pure, but also is about to lose that status through what is in some ways a cruel deception" ("The Hoodwinking" 541). Stillinger's sceptical analysis diversifies the critical readings of the poem, which are predominantly idealistic and positive about Porphyro's actions in earlier studies. However, apart from indicating Madeline's deception by Porphyro, Keats's usage of "Hoodwink'd" also contributes to his construction of sacredness. Instead of extending the meaning of "hoodwinking" to deception, I would stress the word's more basic and literary explanation: the suspension of sight or the prevention from seeing. David Wiener also grasps this aspect of "Hoodwink'd," pointing out that Madeline is "blinded like a hooded falcon as she is blinded from both joy and pain, and incapable of either movement or fulfilment" (124). Wiener's interpretation paves the way for his major argument that "Madeline's world is a paradise freed from mortal taint that does not go anywhere, that ultimately negates the very joys it seeks to enshrine" and "Porphyro makes possible Madeline's fortunate fall" by taking her into a more enlightened world of reality (126). Wiener's reading of the poem as a variation of *felix culpa*, however, contradicts the fact that Madeline's world is definitely not a "paradise freed from mortal taint," but a bustling earthly castle peopled by "whisperers in anger, or in sport; / 'Mid looks of love, defiance, hate, and scorn" (8.68-69). Madeline is born in this very house and lives with, from Porphyro's point of view, "barbarian hordes" and "hot-blooded lords" (10.85-86). She is perhaps not as sophisticated and malignant as proposed by Mary Arseneau, who considers her a "female demon and enchantress" (231), but she is neither an entirely naïve girl inhabiting in a Garden of Eden, knowing nothing about the outside world.

The "hoodwinking" of Madeline, therefore, means more than her blindness to "mortal taints" and the prefiguration of Porphyro's deceptive "stratagem," as Wiener and Stillinger maintain. The "hoodwinking," as I have argued above, signifies the suspension of sight or the prevention from

seeing. It shares the same nature of fasting and nakedness in St. Agnes's ritual that Madeline is ready to perform. Fasting suspends the subject's sense of taste and desire of eating, and, as in Burton's words well-recognised by Keats, puts "the body in subjection," thus opening the door to the sacred/the erotic. Madeline's "hoodwinking" suspends her sense of seeing, which is an active projection of sexual desire, as Lorenzo's "reading" of Isabella's silence in their sexual union and in Porphyro's voyeuristic gaze of Madeline's naked body in later stanzas. Andrew Bennett also correctly observes that "looking in 'St. Agnes' is represented potentially violent: sight constitutes power—the power of seeing and of not being seeing" (99). In other words, "Hoodwinking" resembles her fasting and nakedness in St. Agnes's ritual, in which she will relieve her control of her body, forsaking her individuality and subjectivity. In the ritual, she seeks this state of passivity, because it requires self-annihilation to enter the sphere of sacredness and eroticism. Her passivity of "not seeing" and "being seen," however, will constitute another form of power that absorbs Porphyro in the ritual, as the poem proceeds. In short, apart from indicating Porphyro's victimisation of the "innocent" Madeline, the phrase "Hoodwink'd with faery fancy" corresponds directly to St. Agnes's ritual, reinforcing the idea of Keatsian sacredness.

In Stanza 9, Keats introduces Porphyro, who, "with heart on fire / For Madeline" (9.75-76), sneaks into the castle, where once he is spotted, "a hundred swords / Will storm his heart, Love's fev'rous citadel" (10.83-84). Porphyro's role has been a centre of critical debates in the studies of "The Eve of St. Agnes." He is interpreted as a typical romantic lover by Wasserman, a messenger of the new secularised religion of beauty by Ronald Sharp, a lustful, cruel, deceitful, and opportunistic rapist by Stillinger, a liberating saviour for Madeline by Wiener, a sly but charismatic hero of Gothic tradition by Jerrold Hogle, and even a powerful sorcerer by Karen J. Harvey. And more recently, Susan Wolfsan regards him as "a new kind of Keatsian hero . . . an artful adventurer . . . hoping to 'gaze and worship' unseen—or if things go well, 'Perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss,' all chastely" (75). In addition to these possibilities, on a symbolic level, Porphyro

can also be seen as an executor of sacrifice, in which Madeline has offered her naked body in subjection for the advent of her lover, who serves to complete the ritual of St. Agnes. In *Keats, Hermeticism, and the Secret Societies*, Jennifer N. Wunder highlights Keats's keen interest in contemporary secret societies such as Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry and their initiation rituals. She points out that for Keats, religious rituals signify a paradoxical route, through which human beings can "attain a higher state or merge with the sublime" by "using 'Things real' that constitute the base matter of life" (132). In "The Eve of St. Agnes," the ritual initiated by Madeline to aspire for love, to "require / Of heaven with upward eyes" (6.54), has to be completed by Porphyro's body, the "the base matter of life," the "Things real," which, as Keats writes in his letter to Benjamin Bailey in March 1818, constitute "the ardour of the pursuer," the "Ethereal thing" (KL 1.242). His actions upon Madeline, a sacrificial body in total subjection and passivity, will make her "no weeping Magdalen" by reuniting the spiritual and the corporeal—the eroticisation of the Christian ideas of resurrection and the second coming. Accordingly, Porphyro is a potential Jesus Christ stemming from Agnes's story and the Magdalene reference in the discarded stanza. His sexual participation in Madeline's ritual embodies the spiritual love, thus exemplifying Keatsian sacredness, in which religious devotion and eroticism are united.

After secretly entering the hostile castle, Porphyro meets Angela, "one old beldame, weak in body and in soul" (10.90). The figure of Angela shares certain propensities with the Beadsman. Both are deprived of sexual vitality and outworn by religious asceticism, pettish morality, and timid prudence. She is "the aged creature . . . / Shuffling along with ivory-headed wand" (11.91-92), an ostensible contrast to the youthful and energetic Porphyro, as well as a potential opposite to the eroticised Christianity represented by St. Agnes's ritual. Upon Porphyro's enquiry about Madeline, Angela reveals to him her intention to perform the ritual of St. Agnes's Eve: "my lady fair the conjuror plays / This very night: good angels her deceive! / But let me laugh awhile, I've mickle time to grieve" (14.124-126). Keats seems to chastise

Madeline's belief in Agnes's Eve as sheer superstition through Angela's remarks in these lines. Certainly, we know Keats himself mentions that this poem is based "on a popular superstition" in his letter to Bailey (*LK* 2.139). But how much reliability Keats gives to such a character of inconsistent morality, whose negativity is certified by a grotesque death in the final stanza, is subject to suspicion. Her superficial loyalty to Madeline is marred by her ill sense of humour in deriding her hostess's action: "Feebly she laugheth in the languid moon" (15.127), which the reader sees through Porphyro's point of view: "While Porphyro upon her face doth look, / Like puzzled urchin on an aged crone" (15.128-129). What Keats conveys through Angela's view that Madeline is deceived by "good angels" has two layers of meaning. First, people who commit themselves to orthodox Christianity and religious asceticism such as the Beadsman and Angela cannot understand the essence of St. Agnes's ritual, which lies in the synthesis of sacredness and eroticism. Second, with Angela's words, Keats reminds us of the importance of Porphyro's involvement in the ritual; without corporeal actualisation, Madeline's spiritual efforts can only be a self-deception, a futile dream doomed to end in a ceaseless whirlpool of ungratified desire, as the one tormenting the Beadsman in the beginning stanzas.

Porphyro then comes up with a "stratagem," to which Angela responds with an agitated refusal:

A cruel man and impious thou art:
 Sweet lady, let her pray, and sleep, and dream
 Alone with her good angels, far apart
 From wicked men like thee. Go, go!—I deem
 Thou canst not surely be the same that thou didst seem.
(16.140-144)

Angela has just said that Madeline is deceived by "good angels" to play "the conjuror" in St. Agnes's ritual. But now she wishes Madeline to stay with the deceptive "good angels" and "pray, and sleep, and dream." After Porphyro threatens her with self-destruction by exposing himself to his foes, Angela immediately submits and "will do / Whatever he shall wish, betide her weal or woe" (18.161-162), becoming an accomplice of what she accuses Porphyro of previously: cruelty, impiety, and wickedness. Stillinger is thus correct in

observing Angela as a “traitor” to Madeline (“The Hoodwinking of Madeline” 546). The portrayal of Angela highlights the malicious effects of orthodox Christianity on human beings. Physically and mentally weakened, Angela is reduced to “a feeble soul” and “A poor, weak, palsy-stricken, churchyard thing” (18.154-155). She is restrained by moralised religious doctrines, yet her conviction to them is superficial and pretentious, highly susceptible to outer circumstances. The base character of Angela corresponds to the Beadsman in the first four stanzas; with both figures, Keats exposes the malignant consequences of combining religion and morality—how the Beadsman futilely alienates himself from material and sensual enjoyments and how Angela belies her feeble mentality and moral inconsistency by betraying her “Sweet lady” to a man whom she calls cruel, impious and wicked. The form of Christian religion represented by the Beadsman and Angela is the one deprived of the life-affirming energy of eroticism, thus causing its believers’ physical decadence and mental enslavement. On the contrary, what Madeline seeks to achieve through the Christian motif of St. Agnes’s ritual is a re-affirmation and re-inclusion of sexual desire in the experience of sacredness. Ironically, the final sexual embodiment of the ritual provided by Porphyro is accomplished through Angela’s weak-minded and inconsistent Christian morality.

Porphyro’s “stratagem” as Stanza 19 reveals, is

. . . to lead him, in close secrecy,
 Even to Madeline’s chamber, and there hide
 Him in a closet, of such privacy
 That he might see her beauty unespied,
 And win perhaps that night a peerless bride,
 While legion’d fairies pac’d the coverlet,
 And pale enchantment held her sleepy-eyed.
 Never on such a night have lovers met,
 Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt. (19.163-171)

This stanza presents the theme of voyeurism, or what Stillinger calls “peeping Tomism” (“The Hoodwinking of Madeline” 540), and foreshadows the final consummation. Keats prefigures the sexual relation and positions between Madeline and Porphyro in this stanza. At first look, in both actions of “see her beauty unespied” and “win perhaps that night a peerless bride,”

Porphyro is the active doer while Madeline is the passive receptor. This power relationship seems to conform to Stillinger's argument that Porphyro is a rapist and Madeline is an unconscious and cheated victim. Also, it is a religious ritual of "sacrifice," as Keats himself suggests in the deleted stanza between Stanza 6 and Stanza 7. In other words, Porphyro as a sexual lover stands as the performer of this ritual with Madeline, who offers her naked body in fasting, the "body in subjection" if put in Burton's words, as the sacrificial object in exchange of her lover's arrival. Hence, Madeline's role appears to be passively awaiting Porphyro's sexual advance of potential violence. The motif of ritualistic sacrifice in Christianity represents a violent way to be attached to God, to the sacred experience of divine intimacy, through killing, especially in the Old Testament. Abel's sacrifice of "the firstlings of his flock" (Gen. 4: 4) earns him God's favour, which is reinterpreted by Lord Byron in his *Cain: A Mystery* as "The fumes of scorching flesh and smoking blood" (3.1.299). Abraham wins God's blessing by being willing to slay his own son Isaac in sacrifice (Gen 22: 17). Keats is probably aware of the concept of ritualistic sacrifice in biblical tradition and its potential violence as he weaves latent elements of violence into the ritual of St. Agnes's Eve: the "tongueless nightingale" that "should swell / Her throat in vain, and die" (23.206-207) that alludes to Philomel's rape and mutilation by Tereus, and "A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings" (24.216). In the context of Keatsian sacredness, the ritualistic sacrifice of Madeline aims not to gain God's favour or blessing, but to enable a holistic experience of the sacred and the erotic through sexual embodiment. Keats seemingly presents this embodiment as actively performed by Porphyro upon the passive Madeline, who has already forsaken the control of her body. In fact, however, he diminishes and even annihilates this dichotomy between male/doer and female/receptor. By doing so, Keats demonstrates that in St. Agnes's ritual, there is no difference between the performer of the sacrifice and the sacrificial object; both parties precipitate into a violent state of sacredness and eroticism, in which the boundary of subject and object, self and other, is transgressed. Despite his appearance as an active "gazing" and

“winning” performer, Porphyro also puts his body and soul in subjection and passivity as Madeline does in the ritual of St. Agnes’s Eve.

In the last line of Stanza 19, Keats foreshadows the dissolution of such dichotomy between activeness and passivity by juxtaposing Porphyro with the wizard Merlin in the Arthurian tales, who “paid his Demon all the monstrous debt” (19.171). Cox notes that this reference is puzzling for critics, as Leigh Hunt confesses that he does not understand Merlin’s function here (*KPP* 450). In his *The Daemonic in the Poetry of John Keats*, Charles Patterson argues that in “The Eve of St. Agnes,” Keats creates “a sustained daemonic atmosphere that adds subtly to the charm of the principals shut away from the world” (111), and the reference to Merlin simply serves as one of the magical elements to enhance the daemonic atmosphere. Karen J. Harvey offers another reading of Keats’s juxtaposition of Porphyro and Merlin, which supports my argument of Porphyro’s subjection and passivity in St. Agnes’s ritual. Evoking the details of Merlin’s story in documents such as Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *The History of the Kings of Britain* and Thomas Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur*, Harvey proposes that the “Demon” refers to Vivien, the Lady of the Lake. She argues that Keats deliberately compares Porphyro to Merlin, because both of them woo their lovers “by magic means and is, in turn, entrapped by his own magic” (90). Keats’s alignment between Porphyro and Merlin prefigures the former’s position in Madeline’s ritual, where, despite his apparent sexual initiative and aggressiveness, Porphyro is also subject to the self-annihilating Keatsian sacredness as Madeline.

Keats presents their final encounter in Stanza 23, after Porphyro “gain / The maiden’s chamber, silken, hush’d, and chaste; / Where Porphyro took covert, pleas’d amain” (21.186-188) and Madeline “clos’d the door, she panted, all akin / To spirits of the air, and visions wide” (23.201-202). In this most crucial scene that goes across from Stanza 23 to Stanza 39, Keats gives both Porphyro and Madeline various and often conflicting propensities to construct the heterogeneous experience of Keatsian sacredness. With her body already subject to fasting, Madeline initiates the ritual of St. Agnes by another self-deprivation of an active potency, speaking: “No uttered syllable,

or, woe betide!" (23.203). She is like "a tongueless nightingale" who "should swell / Her throat in vain, and die" (23.206-207), an image that alludes to Philomel, the rape victim of King Tereus of Thrace in Greek mythology, as also noted by Cox and other critics (*KPP* 451). Philomel's tongue is cut by her violator to prevent her from disclosing the crime⁹⁶. The reference to Philomel accordingly becomes one of the textual evidences for sceptical readings that dismiss Porphyro as a cruel and deceitful rapist. From another perspective, Wolfson detects in this passage "those anti-Catholic discourses of virgin hysteria, which manifests in dream, vision, and suppressed speech" (*Reading John Keats* 75). But Keats complicates the seemingly unilateral images with opposite elements. In her silence, Madeline's "heart was voluble, / Paining with eloquence her balmy side" (23.204-205). In other words, her muteness reinforces her body's power of charm; when verbal words are suspended, her somatic performance possesses even higher potency of erotic expression. After Stanza 24, which has this ritualistic place filled with material luxuries,⁹⁷ Keats presents Madeline in a picture of Christian purity, as "down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon" (25.219) and

. . . on her silver cross soft amethyst,
And on her hair a glory, like a saint:
She seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest,
Save wings, for heaven:—Porphyro grew faint:
She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint. (25.221-225)

Gazing Madeline in this sacred phenomenon, where the material, the corporeal, and the spiritual are synthesised, Porphyro "grew faint," even as he is actively executing the projection of his desire with an erotic gaze. His self-control and subjectivity is corroded in this process of seeing Madeline, who is originally a typical image of the Burkean beautiful and is now

⁹⁶ Though tongueless, Philomela weaves a tapestry to reveal the crime to Procne, as narrated in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. A similar and perhaps more gruesome characterisation can be found in Shakespeare's early tragedy *Titus Andronicus*, in which Lavinia's tongue and both hands are severed by Demetrius and Chiron after they rape her. She later reveals the atrocity by writing their names in the dirt with a stick held in her mouth.

⁹⁷ Analysing the problematic "seeing" of Porphyro and the reader, Bennett argues that Stanza 24 presents a "rich, textured and lexically profuse form" that paradoxically detaches the reader from verisimilitude: "The gorgeousness of description not only enhances the reader's pleasure but also estranges him or her from an unmediated experience of the visual: the very virtuosity makes us wary, its very profusion alienates" (106-107).

endowed by Keats with the absorbing power of the sublime.⁹⁸ In Stanza 26, when Madeline begins to undress herself, Keats writes:

Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;
Uncclasps her warmed jewels one by one;
Loosens her fragrant bodice; by degrees
Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees:
Half-hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed,
Pensive awhile she dreams awake, and sees,
In fancy, fair St. Agnes in her bed (26.227-233).

Considering Keats's rhetoric strategy in this stanza, Bennett perceives "an opaque screen, a teasing veil over the spectacle of Madeline's body" (108). In line with Bennett, I also recognise Keats's deliberate indirectness. In this stanza that displays Madeline's nakedness, one of the significant elements of the ritual, Keats does not describe her body directly, but employs other objects to incite erotic imagination. The jewels are "warmed" because they are attached to Madeline's "fragrant bodice" and her "rich attire creeps rustling to her knees," which offers a somatosensory pleasure as if Porphyro is really caressing her skin. Such indirect bodily intimacy strengthens Madeline's silent power of erotic enchantment. In line 231, Keats gives Madeline another heterogeneous characterisation in this scene—"a mermaid in sea-weed." With this drastic shift from a purely Christian portrayal to a simile of magical creature of pagan legends or folklore, Keats further complicates and covertly endows Madeline with more power in terms of her relationship with Porphyro. Arseneau notes that Keats's "combination of attractiveness with disturbing power is a recurrent pattern in the depiction of the feminine in Keats's poetry" (239), and reads Madeline/mermaid as one of the examples of this "disturbing power." The image of mermaid, as Arseneau contends, works with Keats's later reference to Medusa in Stanza 33, and is

⁹⁸ In *Enquiry*, Burke defines the beautiful as "that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it" (91) and elucidates the idea by analysing the female body, especially neck and breasts, parts that are iconic of femininity (107-109). As Burke puts it: "we submit to what we admire [the sublime], we love what submit to us [the beautiful]" (113), one of the most essential elements of the Burkean beautiful is the subject's passive and dominated status, contrary to the sublime that evokes fear and awe, to which the spectators "shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated" (68). Madeline, in her apparent subjugated posture of the Burkean beautiful, in fact possesses the power of the sublime to ensnare Porphyro and annihilate his identity as an active doer in their sexual interaction.

deliberately associated with the Christian images of “saint” and “splendid angel” in Stanza 25 to enthrall Porphyro, to “erase his physical strength and his consciousness” (235). I agree to Arseneau’s interpretation of the “mermaid in sea-weed” in this stanza as a siren-like, “standard type of female demon” (236). Therefore, the mermaid simile blurs the power relationship between Porphyro and Madeline, which is often assumed that the former dominates the latter. Although Madeline is in a passive position of a sacrificial object in the ritual, unconscious, naked, and subject to Porphyro’s gaze, her erotic potency is empowered by such passivity to undermine and absorb the physicality and mentality of Porphyro, the active “gazer” who seems to hold the initiative in this voyeuristic scene.

Undressed, Madeline falls into sleep: “In sort of wakeful swoon, perplex’d she lay, / Until the poppi’d warmth of sleep oppress’d / Her soothed limbs, and soul fatigued away” (27.236-238). Keats interweaves Christian and pagan images with the lines “Clasp’d like a missal where swart Paynims pray; / Blinded alike from sunshine and from rain, / As though a rose should shut, and be a bud again” (27.241-243). Keats obfuscates the distinction between Christianity and paganism by aligning “missal” with “Paynims,” suggesting that the entrance into essential sacredness does not require identification to any particular religious sects. Once human beings can position themselves in subjection, relieving the control of their bodies and forsaking individuality and subjectivity, their perception is no longer restrained by external circumstances (“Blinded alike from sunshine and rain”) and they can even transcend and reverse the sequence of time (“a rose should shut, and be a bud again”).

Gazing at the naked and sleeping Madeline, Porphyro’s subjectivity is continually undermined by her power of passivity and is absorbed into the ritualistic phenomenon, as he is “Stol’n to this paradise, and so entranced” (28.244). The passive “Stol’n” instead of the active “Stealing” insinuates that though Porphyro plays a romantic hero venturing into his lover’s chamber, he is potential the one who is “stolen” and “ventured” upon in this bower of erotic sacredness. After Porphyro “crept” out from his hiding place and attempts to

awake Madeline, Porphyro's subjugated status is more explicit in Stanza 32: "It seem'd he never, never could redeem / From such a stedfast spell his lady's eyes; / So mus'd awhile, entoil'd in woofed phantasies" (32.286-288). The words "spell," "mus'd," and "entoil'd" all conform to Keats's previous juxtaposition between Porphyro's "stratagem" and Merlin's "monstrous debt." As Bennett notes, Porphyro's desire to visually gaze at Madeline "involves bewilderment, astonishment, curiosity: the control and power Porphyro's seeing gives him threaten to be disrupted by this fixed gaze" (100). Keats's design here once again implies that Porphyro's amorous adventure leads him into the enthrallment and imprisonment by female charms.

Stanza 33 is another crucial stanza with Keats's subtle designs of Porphyro's complicated condition:

Awakening up, he took her hollow lute,—
 Tumultuous,—and, in chords that tenderest be,
 He play'd an ancient ditty, long since mute,
 In Provence call'd, "La belle dame sans mercy":
 Close to her ear touching the melody;—
 Wherewith disturb'd, she utter'd a soft moan:
 He ceased—she panted quick—and suddenly
 Her blue affrayed eyes wide open shone;
 Upon his knees he sank, pale as smooth-sculptured stone.
 (33.289-297)

In this stanza, critics have already paid attention to Porphyro's song "La belle dame sans mercy," which would become the title of another Keats's famous poem months later in April 1819. Daniela Garofalo holds that Porphyro sings the song to "play the lover seducing the beloved with . . . a song she does not conspicuously appear to hear" (363). Harvey notes that the song "suggests strongly the subsequent image Keats will create of the enchanted knight 'alone and palely loitering' in a later ballad" (91). Countering Stillinger's sceptical and Wasserman's idealist readings, Heidi Thomson argues that the song serves to present a "story of a mutual seduction gone right" and "reassesses the relationship between Madeline and Porphyro as one of mutual consent as opposed to either rape or a (non-sexual) idealized dream illusion" (338-339). With whatever conclusions, critics all assume that "La

belle dame sans mercy” is sung by Porphyro to awaken Madeline.⁹⁹ To offer a different interpretation, I would highlight Keats’s careful syntactical structure of the first line of this stanza. The fragment “Awakening up” seems to denote that Porphyro is waking up Madeline by taking her lute and singing the song, but the object of the verb phrase “awakening up,” which should be Madeline, is missing. Its absence is not a result of Keats’s recklessness or metrical purpose. It is a subtle device to tell readers about Porphyro’s status in the ritual. That is, for Porphyro, singing “La belle dame sans mercy” is not a means to “awaken” Madeline, but a manifestation of his own self-awakening. Singing “La belle dame sans mercy,” which prefigures a knight enthralled by a Circe-like *femme fatale*, “Alone and palely loitering” (1.2 *PJK* 357), insinuates that Porphyro is no longer in control of himself after entering the ritual. He is waking from an illusion that he, an active male “gazer” and “doer,” holds initiative and a superior position over an apparently receptive and passive female body in erotic experience. Porphyro’s chanting of the collapse of masculinity while confronting the absorbing power of the feminine emphasises the necessity of self-annihilation in sacred/erotic experience even for man, who appear to play an aggressive and dominant role in the Romantic tradition. Moreover, this “awakening” is ascertained in the last two lines of this stanza. Seeing Madeline’s “blue affrayed eyes wide open shone,” Porphyro falls on his knees, “pale as smooth-sculptured stone” (33.296-297). As Arseneau remarks, the hidden reference to Medusa in this line demonstrates “the dissipation in a female presence of the male’s identity and autonomy” (233).¹⁰⁰ After his “awakening up,” Porphyro is now petrified and

⁹⁹ Mark Sandy also provides a different view, arguing that the song reduces Porphyro “to an immovable and silent form, intimating that he and Madeline will be absorbed into a tradition of courtly legend” (*Poetics of Self and Form* 57).

¹⁰⁰ It also reminds us of Keats’s employments of the image of Medusa in the omitted phrase “foul Medusa’s head” in “Isabella” (50.394, *PJK* 259) and the discarded stanza of “Ode on Melancholy”—“Your cordage large uprootings from the skull / Of bald Medusa” (*PJK* 374). Both instances categorise the image of Medusa as a representation of death. In “Isabella,” the “foul Medusa’s head” aggravates the horror of Lorenzo’s corpse. In “Ode on Melancholy,” Medusa is juxtaposed with “dead men’s bones,” “phantom gibbet,” and the poisonous plants and insects in Stanza 1, suggesting that true Melancholy cannot be found in the realm of death, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith notes (684). The covert reference to Medusa in “The Eve of St. Agnes,” if read in light of the above discussion, indicates that the erotic interaction between Porphyro and Madeline is an experience that approximates to death.

renounces his command of body and soul in the erotic sphere of Keatsian sacredness.

The final embodiment of Madeline's dream of St. Agnes's Eve takes place in Stanza 36, after Madeline's awakening in Stanza 34 and 35. The "painful change" from the dreamt Porphyro to the real Porphyro "expell'd / The blisses of her dream so pure and deep" and makes her "moan forth witless words with many a sigh" (34.300-303). The dreamt Porphyro's voice "was at sweet tremble in mine ear, / Made tuneable with every sweetest vow" (35.308-309), but the real Porphyro is "pallid, chill, and drear" (35.311). Madeline's astonishment and disappointment are read as textual evidence that she is "hoodwinked"—betrayed by Angela and deceived by Porphyro. However, she then implores the real Porphyro to "Give me that voice again, my Porphyro, / Those looks immortal, those complainings dear!" (35.311-312). Keats describes Madeline's utterance as "voluptuous accents," which allures Porphyro to consummate with her. Though appearing as a powerless victim facing a male advancement, Madeline again wields her erotic potency of passivity, which is confirmed by Keats's word choice of "voluptuous." Tempted by her words blended with fear, coyness, half-reluctance and half-urging, Porphyro consummates with the half-dreaming Madeline: "Into her dream he melted, as the rose / Blendeth its odour with the violet,— / Solution sweet" (36.320-322). In this culmination of sexual fulfilment, Keats still reminds the reader that it is achieved through a religious ritual, as he concludes Stanza 36 with the line "St. Agnes' moon hath set" and has Porphyro describe himself as "A famish'd pilgrim,—saved by miracle" (38.339), echoing his posture in Stanza 34: "Who knelt, with joined hands and piteous eye" (34.305). Ultimately, the sexual union between Madeline and Porphyro epitomises Keats's conception of religious sacredness in both Christian and non-Christian contexts, which is the re-inclusion of sexual desire. It transcends the lifeless form of Christianity represented by the asceticism of the Beadsman, whose "pious incense" and "harsh penance" symbolise a failed ascent, in Frye's words, back to the primary intimacy with God. Such sacred intimacy, as Keats suggests through his poetic rendering

of St. Agnes and Mary Magdalene, contains sexual desire and erotic activities that are excluded in institutionalised and doctrinal Christianity.¹⁰¹

The final elopement of Madeline and Porphyro appears to be contrasted with the dreadful fate of those in the castle: the Baron's woeful dream, his guests' lasting nightmares, and the deaths of Angela and the Beadsman. However, the line "[t]hese lovers fled away into the *storm*" (42.371, emphasis added) suggests that the elopement does not necessarily leads to an ideal future of love free from the confining castle. Ragussis writes that "the reader's surprised awakening in the last stanza from a simple romance of happy love resembles Madeline's own awakening to a cold winter storm and the prospect that she has been deceived" (380). Mark Sandy further argues that the horrid deaths of Angela and the Beadsman predict the couple's fate, whose "untold future is blighted by the prospect of death, as the passage of time will inevitably consign them to a similar deathly state" ("Dream Lover and Tragic Romance" 14).¹⁰² Despite Keats's adoption of the Christian concept of resurrection by referring to Mary Magdalene, he does not deny the inevitability of death. Nor does the sexual fulfilment presented in "The Eve of St. Agnes" transcend this inevitability, since Keats has already imbued it with potential violence that approximates to death. Madeline's erotic dream, as Tilottama Rajan points out, is "being made real, and therefore mortal" (108). But through the ritual of St. Agnes that brings about

¹⁰¹ In "The Eve of St. Mark," another poem with a similar title and a Christian feast motif, Keats again presents the sacred experience with poetic imagination, though in a less sexual manner. In this poem, Bertha, "a maiden fair / Dwelling in the old Minster Square" (PJK 320) indulges herself in "A curious volume" (319) about St. Marks' life and death. By reading the legendary martyrdom written in Middle English, she is thrilled by the saint's suffering, "[r]ejoicing for his many pains" (322) and accesses the imaginary sphere of sacredness that borders on erotic ecstasy. Walter E. Houghton proposes that the poem "is built on the principle of contrast" (70); Bertha's reading demonstrates a division between reality and the imagination, with the juxtaposition of "the near and familiar, the conventional and commonplace, with the strange, curious, and far-off, the visionary and the exotic" (71). Mary Rebecca Thayer argues that "The Eve of St. Mark" was supposed to feature the story in another poem by Keats, "The Cap and Bells," in which the fairy emperor Elfinan attempts to steal Bertha from her home with a magical book, a theme that echoes Porphyro's action in "The Eve of St. Agnes." Keats's idea of the sacred might be further explored by comparing these two poems based on the feasts of Catholic saints.

¹⁰² Sandy's article "Dream Lovers and Tragic Romance: Negative Fictions in Keats's 'Lamia,' 'The Eve of St Agnes,' and 'Isabella'" is collected in the online journal *Romanticism on the Net*. The numbers in parenthesis indicate the paragraph number shown on its webpage.

this embodiment, Madeline and Porphyro are able to access the sacred/erotic sphere, in which they are temporarily unbound by the bustling castle and the wintry storm. As Patricia A. Parker accurately observes that “both wintry circumference and charmed center are frozen, and the ‘solution’ seems to be in neither one world nor the other but in the whole poetic movement in between” (196). What Keats accentuates poetically is this instantaneous interaction of sacredness and eroticism between Madeline and Porphyro, which grants them an extraordinary life experience from that of the Beadsman and Angela, even though they are destined to the same gruesome fate of death.

In this section focusing on “The Eve of St. Agnes,” I have first traced the influences on and the development of Keats’s idea of religion—how he detaches himself from orthodox Christianity under the influence of scientific empiricism and “the religion of the Heart” from his medical education and his participation in Leigh Hunt’s circle, and how he constructs a religious view of “Soul-making” and “a sense of Identity,” “a system of Salvation which does not affront our reason and humanity” (*LK* 2.103). Second, I highlight the conflicting situation for Keats when his idea of poetic creation as a process of annihilating “character” and “identity” is involved. In “The Eve of St. Agnes,” where religious piety, poetic imagination, and erotic love are synthesised, we see how Keats presents an alternative experience of sacredness that not only rebels against orthodox Christianity, but also differs from his own idea of religion as a means of “Soul-making” to establish “a sense of identity.” I trace Keats’s possible source of St. Agnes’s Eve, not only its ritualistic practice and superstitious effect, but the origin of Agnes’s martyrdom. By exploring Agnes’s hagiography, I demonstrate how Keats draws upon several key elements from it, as well as from Robert Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. This cross-analysis provides novel perspectives to interpret Keats’s employments of Christian images and motifs in the poem, such as the ideas of sacrifice and fasting, and the enigmatical reference to Mary Magdalene. Furthermore, Madeline’s ritual of the Eve of St. Agnes is an erotic embodiment of Keatsian sacredness, in which the often-assumed

dichotomy between Porphyro/the executor/the rapist and Madeline/the sacrificial object/the victim is dissolved. Both Porphyro and Madeline forsake the control of their bodies into subjugation and annihilate their senses of self and subjectivity. For Keats, in the sphere of poetic creation, religious experience is essentially erotic experience. The sacred does not necessitate purity or the exclusion of sexual desire, but reincorporates the elements that are unpresentable and unnameable in orthodox and institutionalised Christianity: the disruption and annihilation of selfhood and subjectivity, the violent, the ecstatic, and the obscene.

CONCLUSION

In her discussion of erotic literature such as Bataille's *Story of the Eye* and the pseudonymous *Story of O*, Susan Sontag recognises pornography not only as a specific form of cultural products for mass consumption, but also as "a psychological phenomenon" and a "modality or convention within the arts" ("The Pornographic Imagination" 83). The pornographic modality explores what Sontag calls "deranged consciousness," and its mechanism of invoking sensual reactions that impact on "the reader's whole experience of his humanity—and his limits as a personality and as a body" (94). The pursuit of sexual extremities featured in pornography discloses in the human psyche an ever-existing discontent with *status quo*—the biologically and socially constructed identity, the somatic conducts regulated by it, and the ordinariness of limited experience derived from it—and the latent will to transcend such *status quo* formed by existing selfhood and subjectivity. When Blake exclaims that "More! More! is the cry of a mistaken soul, less than All cannot satisfy Man" (*CPPB* 2), the Romantic poetical aspiration for a wholesome experience more than "the ratio of all things" and "the same dull round over again" (3) resonates with such a latent will embedded in the pursuit of sexual extremities.

In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth acknowledges that in order to establish a self-sufficient selfhood, a poet should see "into the depth of human souls— / Souls that appear to have no depth at all / To vulgar eyes" (3.165-167 *Major Works* 573), which Andrea K. Henderson terms the "depth model of subjectivity" in English Romanticism (2). But as Sontag warns, the more deeply a human being looks into his/her inner experience, the more likely he/she will encounter the loss of sanity and humanity. Through the poetic exploration of the interior and its reflection on the social exterior, Blake endeavours to restore "the Poetic and Prophetic character" (*CPPB* 3) of "human form divine" in his revisionist Christianity; Shelley looks forward to a future world of constant amelioration, "a happier condition of moral and political society" (*CPWS* 100); Keats, on the other hand, aims to offer a new "religion of Beauty," where human aesthetic feelings are as spontaneous as

“the Leaves to a tree” (*LK* 1.239). The Romantic identities constructed in all these poetic attempts, however, are also threatened and dissolved when the poets venture deeply into human consciousness, into the realm of the erotic and the obscene.

The erotic subject in the works of Blake, and Shelley, and Keats, as this thesis has demonstrated, constitute an aesthetic phenomenon of self-annihilation, particularly in the experiences of religious rituals, sexual anomalies, and poetic creation itself. Similarly, Bataille observes that “all that is sacred is poetic and all that is poetic is sacred” (*Literature and Evil* 84), associating both sacredness and poetry with sexual desire as two forms of *plethora*, the violent exuberance of human energy. That is, religion, art, and eroticism form an essential trinity in the human psyche that constantly seeks to build, reshape, escape from, and eventually destroy existing identity. It also epitomises the desire to go beyond the *status quo* and the ordinary experience of limited selfhood. An examination of this heterogeneous trinity provides an alternative angle to approach other canonised literary works of English Romanticism and explore within them the elements that are “less canonised” and “obscene.” This approach also resonates with the recent studies that have highlighted the material and somatic aspects in the Romantic poets and their works, such as Anya Taylor’s study of drunkenness in her *Bacchus in Romantic England*, Denise Gigante’s examination of eating and food in *Taste: a Literary History*, the essays collected and edited by Tristanne Connolly and Helen P. Bruder in *Queer Blake, Sexy Blake* and mostly recently in 2018, *Beastly Blake*, as well as Jeremy Davies’s 2017 monograph *Bodily Pain in Romantic Literature*.

Based on the essential correlation between eroticism, religious sacredness, and artistic imagination established in this thesis, the research presented here, as mentioned above, could be taken further to study the “less canonised” themes in the eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century literature, for example, the representation of human sacrifice (in both “Druid” paganism and Christian tradition) in Blake’s poetry and art, especially *Jerusalem* and the Illustrations of The Book of Job (already partially

discussed in Chapter 1), or Byron's representation of murder and cannibalism in his *Oriental Tales*, *Don Juan*, and *Cain: A Mystery*. A study such as this might be able to show how these motifs reconceptualise the idea of Romantic "passion" as a violent and mobile drive of consumption, outwardly against others and inwardly against self. The word passion, reinforced by its Latin etymological root of *passio* (suffering) and its eighth definition in Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* as "The last suffering of the Redeemer of the world" (282), is most empowered in the manipulating, maiming, and consuming of the human body. Therefore, further work remains to be done in relation to the motifs that reflects these violent aspects of Romantic passion, such as human sacrifice and cannibalism. And it is possible to bring forth new interpretations by engaging the contemporary thinkers on political economics such as Edmund Burke, William Godwin, and Thomas Malthus, and later philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Georges Bataille.

I hope this doctoral thesis has contributed to the Romantic studies by providing a ground for further critical evaluation of the less explored motifs related to violence and eroticism. The future work could in turn illuminate how the Romantic passion goes beyond the scopes of individual psychological state and interpersonal intercourse of affect, and presents itself as an indicator of larger social and cultural configurations: religion, commerce, war, and the Romantic construal of cosmological order. At last, I hope, this doctoral thesis not only generates new meanings in the Romantic works in their historical context, but also offers a dialectical discourse with later philosophical thoughts, and furthermore, provides insights into the cultural phenomena of our time.

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